

HEALTH , LIFE

4-7-8 breathing: The effective breathing technique for calming and improving sleep

The 4-7-8 breathing technique is a breathing technique that can help reduce stress, solve sleep problems and calm the nervous system. A particularly positive aspect is that it is easy to learn and can be used at any time. In this article, you will learn how the 4-7-8 breathing technique works and what health benefits it offers.

by Brigitte Haase | 10/10/2024



Photo: Stefano Zocca, Unsplash

What is the 4-7-8 breathing?

With the 4-7-8 breathing technique, you breathe in through your nose for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, and then breathe out through your nose for eight seconds. That's a relatively long period of time; a normal breath takes about three seconds. Daniela Mellis, health coach and founder of **Holistic Berlin**, explains: "This special breathing technique can really help effectively in three areas: anxiety, stress, and poor sleep." The fact is: most of us breathe shorter and shallower than is good. That's why it often feels like we're quickly running out of breath when exercising, for example. Learning to breathe consciously and correctly has numerous health benefits.

Origin and Development of the 4-7-8 Breathing Technique

For yoga practitioners, the 4-7-8 breathing technique is one of the basics. It is based on pranayama, a traditional breathing technique in yoga that is said to have a healing effect by bringing the mind and body together. Dr. Andrew Weil, founder of the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine, has further developed the 4-7-8 breathing cycle. This breathing technique works by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and switching off the sympathetic nervous system. Daniela Mellis explains: "Our breathing can regulate both systems - it can both stimulate and calm."

Benefits of the 4-7-8 breathing technique

The 4-7-8 breathing pattern has numerous health benefits:

- **Calming the nervous system** : By activating the vagus nerve, the heart rate slows down, blood pressure drops and muscles relax. Stress hormones are reduced and the brain releases relaxation hormones.
- **Sleep Improvement** : Many people report that the 4-7-8 breathing technique helps them fall asleep faster. Focusing on breathing helps interrupt rumination and puts the body into a deep state of relaxation.
- **Stress relief** : The breathing technique helps calm the body and mind in stressful situations by regulating the nervous system and triggering a chain reaction of relaxation.

calming the nervous system

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in the system; it is something like the control center. Our expert explains: "Imagine the vagus nerve as a thick cable that reaches from the brain to the abdomen and connects all the important organs. The 4-7-8 breathing can stimulate the vagus nerve and thus the so-called parasympathetic nervous system. This sets off a chain reaction: the heartbeat slows down, blood pressure drops, the muscles relax, the anti-

stress hormone cortisol is produced, the brain reacts and releases relaxation hormones.” With the right breathing technique, you can essentially press your own brake button and thus effectively reduce stress.

sleep improvement and stress reduction

The 4-7-8 breathing technique in particular has earned the reputation of being a superpower when falling asleep, as it can put the body into a deep state of relaxation. And who hasn't had that experience before: you go to bed dead tired and then can't fall asleep because your thoughts keep going round and round... In this case, concentrating on a specific breathing technique breaks the constant brooding and makes it easier to fall asleep.



Expert and health coach Daniela Mellis, photo: private

Other benefits of 4-7-8 breathing

By stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, 4-7-8 breathing can lower blood pressure. It is also said to prevent food cravings, but this cannot be proven reliably from a medical point of view. However, since digestion is also affected by stress and 4-7-8 breathing can relieve stress, it can even **improve bowel function** !

However, if you have medical problems, you should definitely consult your doctor. Breathing techniques can help, but they are no substitute for medical treatment for serious illnesses.

This is how the 4-7-8 breathing technique works

step-by-step instructions:

The 4-7-8 breathing is very easy to learn. Here are simple instructions:

1. **Inhale for four seconds:** Breathe in slowly and evenly through your nose for four seconds.
2. **Seven-second breath hold:** Hold your breath for seven counts. This helps increase oxygen levels.

3. **Exhale for eight seconds:** Now breathe out slowly and evenly through your nose for eight seconds.

Tip: For beginners

it is often helpful to find your own rhythm instead of focusing on seconds.

Tips for the correct use of the 4-7-8 breathing technique

Health Coach Daniela Mellis recommends practicing the 4-7-8 breathing pattern daily to perfect it. Here are some tips for proper execution:

- **Posture:** Sit upright with your feet flat on the floor or lie on your back. It is important that your stomach and chest can move freely.
- **Preparation:** Find a quiet place and close your eyes before you start breathing.
- **Avoid sources of error:** Make sure you breathe in and out evenly through your nose. Avoid shallow breathing and make sure you breathe deeply from your stomach.

Daniela Mellis gives a tip for beginners: "It doesn't even have to be seconds, it's best to find your own rhythm - it just shouldn't be too fast, you should be able to count slowly. The idea behind this is that counting units don't put you under as much pressure as seconds. Then hold your breath for seven counts, which increases the oxygen level. Finally, breathe out slowly through your nose for eight counts, which can be tense for a moment, but ultimately has a calming effect. Some people find it helpful to make a 'SHSH' sound while doing this. But everyone has to find out for themselves whether it helps or distracts. And don't panic if the 4-7-8 breathing doesn't work perfectly right away, that's completely normal! The long exhalation through the nose in particular needs to be practiced, it will work better each time."

How often & for how long should you do the 4-7-8 breathing?

"To begin with, you should practice the 4-7-8 breathing technique every day for at least a week until you have mastered it. The hardest part is holding your breath and breathing out in a controlled manner - but this breathing technique is really easy to learn," advises our health coach.

How often and how long should you use the 4-7-8 breathing

The breathing technique should be performed at least once or twice a day. On stressful days, the effect lasts longer, which is not unusual. If you need to get out of a particularly stressful situation quickly, you can also perform the 4-7-8 breathing twice in a row. Or you are confronted with a situation that you know will trigger you: the 4-7-8 breathing helps as a component against it.

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Sources of Error in the 4-7-8 Breathing Technique

As with any other physical exercise, this breathing technique also has some sources of error. "It's not that easy not to tense up when holding your breath at the beginning. It takes practice until you can do it in a relaxed way. You should breathe in really evenly and only through your nose. If you breathe too shallowly, you won't activate your abdominal breathing, which is necessary. Try to set a rhythm for yourself, then you will breathe more evenly. When you breathe out through your mouth, you must not pant, the breath must be drawn out - eight units is not that short. Send your thoughts on a journey. For example, I like to think of placing a thought on a cloud and just letting it float away," reveals Daniela Mellis.

How can the 4-7-8 breathing be integrated into everyday life?

The breathing technique can easily be incorporated into your daily routine. Here are three ideal times:

- **Morning:** Start your day with the 4-7-8 breathing to start the day relaxed.
- **After work:** Perform the technique before you get home or after work to ease the transition into the relaxation phase.
- **In the evening before going to bed:** Use the breathing technique to stop your thoughts from racing and fall asleep faster.

Conclusion

As a simple but effective tool for managing stress, 4-7-8 breathing has only advantages. "You can breathe consciously anywhere, standing, sitting, lying down... You don't need any equipment and it's super flexible. Whether in the office, while exercising, in the bath or before going to bed, you can practice anywhere. What I like most about this special breathing technique is that it helps you listen to your body and learn how it reacts," summarizes health coach Daniela Mellis. The positive effects of 4-7-8 breathing on health should also be convincing enough to start practicing it today and then regularly.

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