

The Essentials of Breathing Correctly

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In the April issue of the eNewsletter, we talked about the importance of using "Soft Eyes" in your riding. Now we move on to the second of the "Four Basics," correct use of breath. Correct breathing is not only essential for us as humans; our breathing also affects the horse we are riding. How would you feel if your horse held his breath? This would not only communicate that your horse was frightened – you would no doubt feel frightened as well.

This is exactly how your horse feels if you hold your breath. If you are holding your breath as you come to an obstacle in your way, your horse says "Whoa! She's frightened! There must be something to fear!" But if you breathe without tension, in a constant and rhythmical way, throughout your whole body, it gives your horse confidence.

To breathe correctly, you must think about your diaphragm, which is a powerful mushroom-shaped muscle (one of the largest muscles in the body) that goes across your body beneath your rib cage. The front end is just at the bottom of your breast bone. Its root is attached to the front of the lower spine. When you inhale, the diaphragm is pulled down, creating a vacuum in the lungs and drawing in air. When you exhale, the muscle relaxes, and air is pushed out. If we breathe as nature intended, the lungs are given a chance to fill the large area created by your expanding rib cage.

To practice breathing correctly, imagine that the air is going through a large, flexible tube right down through the center to the bottom of your body. Visualizing that you are breathing to a point below your belt line helps make the diaphragm properly descend. Then, simply allow the ribs to expand without force and you will notice that you have air intake with less physical tension than if you were to breathe by consciously raising your ribs. Try putting your hand flat across your belly with your thumb on your navel. If you are breathing correctly with your diaphragm, you will feel action under your hand. As another exercise, try holding your breath for ten seconds, then breathe normally. Did you feel the tension in your body when you held your breath? Did you feel your body relax when you began to breathe again? Your horse will notice this same tension when you hold your breath. Practice breathing correctly on your horse. As you walk your horse, use your imagination that the large, flexible tube extends down through your body, beyond your pelvis and down all the way into your boots. Breathe through your whole body.

Proper breathing will result in reduced tension throughout your body. Your center of gravity becomes lower and your body becomes less top heavy. By breathing correctly, you, as a rider, will not tire as easily and you will notice that your horse becomes quieter and more responsive.

Photo drawn by Susan Harris, Senior Level IV Centered Riding Instructor from Cortland, NY

