

FITNESS ROUTINE FOR THE VAGUS NERVE

The gut is the key to health. It may also be the key to happiness, as well! The gut plays a role in stress modulation. It does this by transmitting signals to and from the brain via neurotransmitters, along the vagus nerve. This nerve is the biggest in the body, extending all the way from the brainstem to the intestines and branching out to connect the major organs.

Supporting and stimulating the vagus nerve is another way to support optimal gut health. The following exercises can support a healthy vagal tone. You can pick and choose from the list, or incorporate all of them into your daily routine! Pay attention to your stress levels and the feelings in your body. Take time out to relax, de-stress, and do what feels right for you.

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

“Pranayama” refers to yogic breathwork.

Here’s a simple pranayama exercise you can do anywhere:

- Place your right thumb on the outside of your right nostril, closing it off.
- Inhale fully, through your left nostril.
- Holding the breath, use your right ring finger to close off your left nostril, and then remove your thumb from your right nostril.
- Exhale fully out of your right nostril.
- Keeping your ring finger on your left nostril, inhale fully through your right nostril.
- Holding at the top of the breath, switch fingers again, putting your thumb on the outside of your right nostril, and removing the ring finger from the left.
- Exhale fully out of your left nostril.

This is one round. Continue for 5-10 rounds, or until you feel relaxed.

COLD PLUNGE

The cold plunge is a practice that exists in many cultures. **This practice is done to help build the immune system by building resilience to stress** (the shock of going from hot to cold), and by supporting the body’s ability to transition between the sympathetic to parasympathetic nervous systems.

To do a cold plunge, immerse your body in warm water for five minutes. Then, immediately jump or transition into cold water for 20 seconds. A less drastic approach is to rinse your face with very cold water first thing in the morning or after a hot shower. Many spas also have hot and cold plunge pools that you can dip in and out of.

CREATE ENERGY THROUGH POSITIVE SOUND

Releasing positive tones through your vocal cords can stimulate the vagus nerve. This can be done through singing, humming, and chanting. How can you incorporate this into your daily routine? Can you sing in the shower or in your car on the way to and from work? Hum while doing chores? What about chanting “om” or a prayer as part of your morning ritual? You can get even more benefits by doubling down and doing this as part of a social activity – such as attending weekly karaoke night with friends or joining a choir. What resonates with you?

GENTLE MOVEMENT

Yoga and tai chi are both great ways to gently move the body and stimulate the vagus nerve through calming exercise.

Here’s a great all-levels yoga sequence for the vagus nerve. Demonstrations of poses can be found on websites like yogajournal.com.

- Several rounds of sun salutations
- Sun salutation leading into crescent pose
- Sun salutation leading into chair pose with a twist and arms stretched wide open
- Triangle pose
- Reverse warrior pose
- Cat stretch
- Reverse tabletop
- Legs up the wall
- Reclined twist to the right
- Reclined twist to the left

Bonus! Add in some singing, chanting, and/or breathwork.

LAUGH

Laughter can stimulate the vagus nerve and have positive effects on heart rate. After all, as they say, laughter is the best medicine – especially a deep belly laugh! Have you ever heard of a laughing yoga class? Find out if there’s one near you. The power of group laughter is infectious. Even if you are faking it at first, your mind will follow the lead of your facial expression and body, and you’ll find yourself in a state of true laughter in no time.

How can you add more laughter into your daily life? Do you take time to watch funny television shows or movies? Do you spend time with people who crack you up? Could you swap out an educational podcast for a stand-up comedy routine a few times a week? Take some time to find your funny!

MEDITATE

Meditation has a positive effect on stress and heart rate. It's great for the vagus nerve. Even 5-10 minutes of meditation a day can have a significant effect.

Find a meditation practice that works best for you – whether that involves using an app or a guided meditation, sitting quietly in nature, or lighting a candle and fixing your gaze upon it. Meditation is a bio-individual experience. It's less important how you do it, as long as you take the time to carve out a regular practice.

Record your emotions and thoughts after meditation. See if this practice has a noticeable impact on your stress levels and emotions after a week or two.

PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING

Making a practice of slowly and fully inhaling and exhaling each breath helps to slow down the body and combat against stress, activating the parasympathetic nervous system and stimulating the vagus nerve. It's not realistic to breathe like this all the time, but it's a great habit to consciously employ when you catch yourself stressed and wound up. Additionally, creating a deep breathing practice, even just for 5-10 minutes once or twice a day, can create a profound shift in your nervous system and your stress levels.