

# BE WELL

## The Vagus Nerve: An Operator's Guide to Stimulating your Relaxation Response to DeStress

What is your vagus nerve? It's the longest of the cranial nerves (it comes directly from your brain) and it controls your inner nerve center – the parasympathetic nervous system. It travels down the front of your spinal column and communicates with the diaphragm. Eighty percent of the vagus nerve fibers communicate from the body to the brain and 20 percent communicate from the brain to the body.

The vagus nerve is so-named because it "wanders" like a vagabond, sending out sensory fibers from your brainstem to your visceral organs. It oversees a vast range of crucial functions, communicating motor and sensory impulses to every organ in your body. It sends an anti-inflammatory signal to other parts of the body. It is often overlooked, a kind of missing link, in the treatment of chronic inflammation. Activating your vagus nerve is good for you.

What are the benefits? Stimulating your vagus nerves turns on neurogenesis, helping your brain sprout new brain cells. It rapidly turns off the stress, hyper-arousal, and fight/flight system via the relaxation response. It sharpens your memories. Crucially, it fights inflammatory disease, a major factor in aging and poor health. Other benefits include:

- Improving high blood pressure.
- Blocking the hormone cortisol and other oxidizing agents that age and deteriorate the brain and body.
- Overcoming depression and anxiety.
- Improving sleep.
- Raising levels of human growth hormone.
- Overcoming insulin resistance.
- Turning down the allergic responses.
- Lowering the likelihood chances of stress and tension headaches.
- Benefiting mitochondria – key to maintaining optimal energy levels and not harming our DNA and RNA
- Improving your overall ability to live a longer, healthier and more energetic life.

So how can you unlock these benefits? Read on.

### Vagus Nerve Stimulation Practices

Next time you finish exercising, immerse your face in cold water. This stimulates the vagus nerve, reducing heart rate, motility of the intestines, and activates the immune

system.

Another technique, one you can try without moving from where you are now sitting (or standing), is to increase your salivation. Imagine biting into a juicy lemon. As your mouth fills with saliva, just rest your tongue in this bath – if it doesn't happen, fill mouth with small amount of warm water and rest your tongue in this bath. The practice of simply relaxing will stimulate the secretion of saliva. Now relax further, and feel your hands, feet, hips, back of the neck and head all relaxing. Breathe deeply into this feeling.

It's perhaps not surprising that loud singing or chanting is good for vagus nerve stimulation. The vibration sensation goes throughout the entire body, including the vagus nerve. Try belting out a song. Another method: 7 rounds of "OM – OH/MMM-MMM."

Mindful breathing is also effective for stimulating the vagus nerve. Try deep, slow, belly breathing : (4/6 x 6 rounds = 6 breaths/minute, repeat 3 times) and then breathe more slowly. The goal is 6 breaths per minute. Breathe more deeply, from the belly: think about expanding your abdomen and widening your rib cage as you inhale. Exhale longer than you inhale.

You can also try, "Ujjayi Breath" which involves subtle constriction of the back of the

throat (like fogging up a mirror) for three minutes. "Seated breath awareness," where you pay attention to your breath and determine the difference in your awareness of your breath from the start to the finish of the practice, is another good practice for vagus nerve stimulation.

**"Mindful breathing brings calm and relief to the mind and body."**

*Samara D. Anderson, Esq. is a Technical Regulatory Compliance Advisor for the Department of Children and Families, a Registered 200-hour Yoga Medicine™ Yoga Teacher (completing her 500-hour certification), a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Teacher-in-Training, and a social entrepreneur teaching mindfulness to stressed professionals while creating a non-profit community farm in Vermont to use therapeutic animals, nature, and mindfulness to heal people. She also Chairs the VBA Lawyer Well-Being Section. Please contact her if you or your organization want to learn more mindful practices to destress the body and the mind, while increasing overall focus and productivity (anderson\_samara@yahoo.com).*



### HAVE A CATASTROPHIC INJURY OR ILLNESS CASE?

Connect with certified  
and experienced  
Nurse Life Care Planners at  
Medical and Life Care Consulting today!

Medical and Life Care Consulting  
www.medicalandlifecare.com  
Tel. (413) 323 - 9705