The Wolfson Centre for Diabetes and Endocrinology

Simple relaxation for well-being

Diabetes Pre-pregnancy Clinic

Who is this leaflet for? What is its aim?

Stress and anxiety have an impact on your body. Simple relaxation techniques can help to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety, which are closely linked, on you. This leaflet is to help you learn some simple relaxation techniques that will help you for life including during pregnancy, labour and whilst looking after young children.

Relaxation, diabetes and planning for pregnancy

What does stress and anxiety do to my body?

Your nervous system has two main states of being or of responding to your environment – the sympathetic response and the parasympathetic response.

When you are stressed, fearful or anxious, the sympathetic response comes into play. It affects every system via the nerves running throughout your body and is to help you overcome challenges and dangers. It is sometimes called the fight or flight response and when you are in this state, you release hormones called catecholemines such as adrenaline, which have the following impact:

- your heart-rate increases
- your blood goes to your arms, legs and lungs and away from your digestive system so your digestion slows down
- you breathe more quickly
- your blood pressure goes up
- your mouth can feel dry
- you sweat more
- you pass urine less
- your pupils dilate
- your liver converts more glycogen to glucose (not great for your readings)

This helps you to escape from or fight danger when it exists but it is tiring and wearing if you are not in danger. It also doesn't help you achieve the level of HbA1c you want when planning pregnancy, due to extra glucose being made.
What does relaxation do to my body?

When you are relaxed, feel safe and confident, your parasympathetic response comes into play. It also affects every part of your body and fills you with a sense of calm and well-being. It is sometimes called the rest and digest response. When you are in this state, you release a hormone called oxytocin which plays an important role in birth and breastfeeding, which is why relaxation exercises are taught during pregnancy. Oxytocin leads to the release of compounds called endorphins and together, these have the following effects:

- your heart-rate slows
- your blood goes to your internal organs (digestion is increased)
- your blood-pressure reduces
- saliva increases
- you pass urine more
- your pupils constrict
- you feel calm and confident

Oxytocin plays an important part in sex, love and co-operation and is often referred to as The Hormone of Love. It has been little understood to date but now scientists are finding out a lot about it. Meditation, yoga and relaxation can all release oxytocin and help shut off the sympathetic response. Endorphins also make one feel happier (they are sometimes described as natural opiates) and are also released when we go for a walk or run for example, and may help explain the well-known anti-depressant effects of exercise.

Sometimes anxiety and stress are thought to make conceiving a baby more difficult or take longer. This may be to do with stress preventing oxytocin being released, so stimulating the parasympathetic response through relaxation may help you conceive quicker.

The two responses – the sympathetic and the parasympathetic – cannot operate at the same time; you either experience one or the other. So learning to replace your sympathetic responses with parasympathetic responses, or shorten the amount of time you spend feeling stressed or anxious, can be very beneficial.

Two simple relaxation exercises

You can learn to relax deeply anytime and anywhere. You can take a few minutes in a traffic jam, on the train, at the school gates or in the queue at the supermarket check-out to breathe and relax your face and neck muscles as described below. The more you practise, the easier it becomes.

However, to learn relaxation it is advisable to take five or ten minutes at a quiet time of day to relax deeply. A suitable CD playing softly in the background may help (see end of leaflet) as well as an essential oil diffusing or candle burning (lavender is well-known as a calming oil for example).
Make sure you don't have a full bladder before you start. You may prefer to ask someone to read the following relaxations slowly to you, or you may prefer to read them a few times and then close your eyes and work through them for the first few times you do them.

**Head and face relaxation**

Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on your bed. Allow your breathing to slow down and deepen, spending a minute or two getting used to its slower and deeper rate.

Let your eyes close gently and easily, continuing to breathe comfortably, slowly and deeply. Let the relaxation in your eyelids spread outwards to your forehead so that it too relaxes and becomes smooth and comfortable.

Just pause for a short while, and then allow the relaxation to spread naturally from your forehead to flow in and around your eyes, and on downwards through your cheeks, to your jaw, and your neck, allowing your whole face to relax.

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply. Allow your mouth to relax as well, so that it is entirely soft and relaxed, with your lips and your eyes gently smiling.

Let your tongue relax completely naturally in your mouth, so that your whole face and head are totally and gently relaxed.

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply and enjoy the feeling of comfort and wellbeing.

Finally, allow your shoulders to relax and sink to their natural level, so that your whole body is calm, limp and relaxed, and your breathing is soft and slow.

Rest for a few minutes or as long as you like in the sure knowledge that this simple relaxation is there for you whenever you want to feel calm and relaxed.

Enjoy feeling the slow, steady rhythm of your breath and the soft relaxed feel of your face, neck and shoulders.

**Complete body relaxation**

Over time, you can broaden this exercise to take in your whole body, by simply continuing to work slowly down your body allowing each part to relax and go loose and soft in turn.

Remember to continue breathing slowly and deeply.

**Chest**

**Tummy** (check that your tummy is softly rising and falling with each breath)

**Arms**

**Wrists**

**Hands and fingers**

**Legs**

**Ankles**

**Feet**
Go back and check that no tension or tightness has crept back in higher up. If you find worrying thoughts appearing, then focus again on your breathing and how your lungs are filling and emptying so gently and steadily.

Remember to take a few minutes simply to note how this state of relaxation feels and enjoy it.

When you have finished the exercise, just open your eyes, take a couple of deep breaths, and move your head and shoulders from side to side (unless you are planning to go straight to sleep) before getting up.

**CDs and APPs for relaxation**

Many people find relaxation CDs very helpful. There are many such CDs available and it is a very individual thing – what one person finds soothing, another may find irritating. Here are some suggestions which are all available from the main internet outlets and app stores:

**Riverdawn: piano meditations.** Catherine Mary Charlton.
60 minutes of uninterrupted calm and gentle piano playing.

**Reiki: music for healing and relaxation.** Llewellyn
Gentle new age music

**Body & Soul: Relaxation – resting the mind, reviving the body.** Various artists.
As above.

**Hildegard von Bingen: 11,000 Virgins - Chants for the Feast of St. Ursula.** Anonymous 4.
12th century chants by a female group.

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**Contacts/Further information**

Diabetes Specialist Nurses: 01223 348780
References/ Sources of evidence


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We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site. For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

**Other formats:**

If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio, please ask the department where you are being treated, to contact the patient information team: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk.

Please note: We do not currently hold many leaflets in other languages; written translation requests are funded and agreed by the department who has authored the leaflet.

**Document history**

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