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itting comfortably amid a host of performance-boosting fitness tech is our breath, an integral tool that costs nothing and is available to all. Now, a growing number of us are learning to exercise control over what is typically seen as a subconscious process. The aim? To supercharge our ability to do just about anything better, whether that's exercise, thinking or even prolonging our lifespan.

"You can think of the breath as your body's very own inbuilt Swiss Army Knife that, when used purposefully, can help to reduce stress and anxiety, increase energy levels, rebalance hormones, heighten focus and concentration, improve sleep and digestion, alleviate chronic pain and improve cardiovascular health and athletic performance," says Richie Bostock, otherwise known as The Breath Guy.

His interest in the breath began after his father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), an autoimmune disease with no widely accepted cure. Having searched for alternative treatments, Bostock came across Wim Hof, nicknamed The Iceman, whose work is renowned in modern wellness circles – Gwyneth Paltrow is a fan.

"The Wim Hof Method combines two key elements: cold exposure activities – like cold showers – and breathing techniques," says Bostock. Having implemented these two simple techniques every morning for the last few years, his father's MS has not worsened. Now, Bostock extols the transformative effects of breathwork.

Breathing effectively kick-starts myriad processes within our cells that can have a powerful effect on our wellbeing. However, many of us subliminally adopt dysfunctional

breathing patterns, which prevent this from happening, impacting not just our stress levels, but how the body performs.

Whether you want to excel at sport or simply age without aches and pains, the first step is to swap chest breathing – common in those that are chronically stressed – for diaphragmatic breathing. "The diaphragm is an active part of the core and works in concert with the abs to maintain the stability of the trunk, spine and pelvis," explains Patrick McKeown, author of *The Oxygen Advantage*.

To switch on the diaphragmatic breath, Bostock recommends a technique called coherence breathing, where you perform a series of five-second inhalations and exhalations, through the nose, for three minutes. "Place your hands on the bottom of your rib cage while you do so and notice the expansion of the abdomen as you inhale," he adds.

Oxygen, our cells' primary fuel, means that breath is also key during exercise. In professional sport, the aim is to make the body a more efficient machine. The more optimal the breath, the better oxygen can reach muscles and organs for improved performance and speedier muscle repair.

For those of us who aren't professional athletes, it may just be about switching to a new style of breath while out for a run. McKeown says in amateur exercise the aim is to breathe through your nose. Apple Watch has been among the first to lean into the diagnostic element of performance-based breathing, using its VO2 max function to measure the amount of oxygen the body can extract from inhaled air during exercise – and the higher it is, the more optimal your fitness levels are.

A growing number of athletes, particularly since the pandemic, are making hyperbaric oxygen (HBO) therapy a mainstay in their exercise and recovery routines. Its myriad benefits include reducing inflammation and brain fog, boosting energy levels, maximising post-workout recovery, removing the body's toxic load and

stimulating youth-giving stem cells. Boxer Ramla Ali lauded the therapy following a bout of Covid; footballer Cristiano Ronaldo is said to have a hyperbaric chamber in his house; and Justin Bieber is also a fan. A treatment involves sitting in a chamber and breathing in near-pure oxygen for 90 minutes.

"Recent Israeli research has shown that the use of HBO therapy for 90 minutes a day, five days a week, for a three-month period, decreased the rate of ageing by 20 per cent," says Dr Tamsin Lewis, medical director at RoseBar, which recently launched at Six Senses in Ibiza. "These results attracted huge interest from the scientific community because no other intervention has been shown to have this impact in a three month time interval." It has become a popular treatment for those suffering long Covid, and in the US it's becoming the norm for hospital operations to take place in hyperbaric operating theatres to improve recovery time afterwards. In London, you can visit RejuvLab on Harley Street and The Wellness Lab in Knightsbridge.

Working in synergy with the breath, as Bostock discovered, is cold immersion therapy. Athletes have long harnessed this method but, thanks to advocates such as Hof and Lady Gaga, it's entering the mainstream. Whether a warm-to-cold shower at home or a (more luxurious) day at Beaverbrook Spa for its Wim Hof Method Workshop, combining breathwork and the cold activates healing processes, reduces inflammation, boosts the lymphatic and immune systems and prevents chronic illness.

An easy next step is to try a cryotherapy session, which involves standing in a capsule at temperatures of around -130C for up to three minutes. It's bracing but bearable. "Breathwork is a great accompaniment to cryotherapy and cold exposure," explains Maria Ensabella, founder of LondonCryo. "For example, breathwork prior to cryo can be used to activate your inner fire, boosting circulation and activating the sympathetic nervous system response." And if you struggle? All you have to do is breathe.

BODY BOOSTERS

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From left: THERABODY RecoveryAir Compression System, £599. APPLE Watch Series 7, from £370. NIKE Alpha UltraBreathe Sports Bra, from £50. LULULEMON Blissfeel Trainers, £138. OURA Ring, £250. HIGHER DOSE Infrared Sauna Blanket, £539