

Breathing technique

Exhalation

Very few novice swimmers exhale properly into the water. Nearly all intermediate swimmers think they are exhaling correctly - at least, that's what they say when we ask them. Do they? Very few do. Even amongst advanced swimmers, quite a few like to hold onto their breath under the water.

Why is this an important swimming technique? Getting your exhalation right will make freestyle feel much easier, get you balanced in the water and as a bonus, make you more relaxed whilst swimming. This will benefit any swimmer, from beginner to elite.

How you should breathe

The secret of freestyle breathing is a good exhalation.

Whenever your face is in the water, exhale constantly and smoothly.

When you are swimming you should always be exhaling except when you turn your head to inhale.

You can exhale through your mouth or through your nose or through both, it doesn't matter. But when your face is in the water you should be exhaling all the time in one constant stream of bubbles.

Do you do this? You're probably thinking 'yes I do'. We ask hundreds of swimmers this question every year, nearly all of them answer 'yes' but when they jump in the pool and we watch their breathing technique, they are nearly all holding their breath underwater!

How do most swimmers exhale?

After inhaling and returning their face to the water, most people hold that breath for at least one stroke, if not two. Shortly before their next inhalation they exhale very late into the water, often finishing that exhalation into the air when they've turned to breathe in.

They feel they are exhaling into the water because they do a little before inhalation, but that is too little too late.

When the swimmers make a little outward spray of water from the mouth area as the swimmer turns to take their breath - this is a classic sign of late exhalation. Such a swimmer will immediately feel more relaxed from an improved exhalation technique.

Why is it important to exhale constantly?

1) The most important reason is that when you hold your breath you tense up. When you breathe out you release that tension. Imagine you're having a stressful day and someone tells you to take a deep breath - it's not when you take the breath in that you feel better, it's when you let it go. Holding your breath tenses you up and that is bad for your swimming technique.

2) When you are holding your breath you can feel that you need to breathe. The sensation you are feeling is not the lack of oxygen, it's the build up of CO₂. By holding your breath you are keeping the CO₂ in your blood stream and lungs - this makes you feel desperate for air.

Breathing out constantly while you swim feels much nicer - you get rid of the CO₂ and no longer feel so desperate for air.

3) Having lungs full of air is bad for your body position - your chest is too buoyant. Since your body acts like a see saw around your centre, this causes your legs to sink in the water, creating extra drag.

4) Most swimmers try to exhale just before they turn their head to breathe - or even worse, try and exhale and inhale in the short window when their mouth is above the waterline! This is a really hard thing to do, each breath feels snatched and panicky. If you breathe late like this, the tendency is to lift your head to breathe to give yourself a bit more time. Lifting your head is bad swimming technique, it causes your legs to sink - adding lots of drag.

Conclusion: exhaling constantly and continuously is a fundamental of a good freestyle stroke technique.

