

Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve connects the brain and gut together. It runs from the brain, passing and contacting the tongue, vocal cords, throat, heart, lungs, diaphragm, liver, spleen, large intestine, small intestine, pancreas and kidneys, ending as a ball of nerve endings in the stomach. Vagus comes from the Latin word meaning “wandering, rambling, strolling” and the vagus nerve is named as such due to its vast and non-specific nature.

The vagus nerve (VN) originates in the brain stem - that part that senses, processes and regulates the vast majority of the automatic functions of the body. For the most part we don't have to think about these functions - they are autonomic and are regulated by the autonomic nervous system. Some of the functions are:

- Beating of the heart
- Blinking of eyelids
- Breath rate and depth
- Contraction and dilation of blood vessels
- Detoxification in the liver and kidneys
- Digestion in the digestive tract (peristalsis action)
- Opening and closing of sweat glands
- Producing saliva and tears
- Pupil dilation and constriction in the eyes
- Urination

“If the human brain were so simple that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't.” - Emerson W Pugh.

There is so much science behind the nervous system and you could read about it for hours, there's no substitute for first-hand experience. Simply put; we know what it feels like when we stimulate the VN, because we feel more relaxed. Think of the VN a little like your in-built de-stressor, available to engage with at any time. There are some very simple ways of working with the VN to bring your body into a state of balance, and empower yourself with your own healing tools.

Slow Deep Breathing

Breathing is one of the most simple and effective ways to stimulate the vagus nerve and move into the relaxation response. Simply taking a slow, long and diaphragmatic breath is enough to encourage the vagus nerve to let the brain know it's time to relax.

The vagus nerve runs through the throat and vocal cords, so specific yogic pranayama techniques like Ujjayi breath and Brahmari breath (humming-bee breath) can be even more powerful. Also use with the Tibetan Brahmari breath.

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Singing and Chanting and Humming

Similar to the way Brahmari breath vibrates the vocal chords, singing and chanting have been shown to work with the vagus nerve to bring the body into a state of 'rest and digest'. If singing makes you feel self-conscious and stressed, try singing or humming to your favourite tune in the shower or singing along with the radio in your car! Any song or mantra you enjoy can help to bring about this response, but the 'Aum' or 'Om' mantra is particularly effective for cultivating a sense of calm, and also sends out purifying, positive vibrations to the environment around you.

Meditation

Whether it's a guided meditation, or a regular routine of sitting and watching your breath, meditation has been shown to activate the parasympathetic nervous system by slowing the heart rate and breathing, relaxing the muscles of the abdomen, and slowing brainwave activity.

All of these aspects signal to the vagus nerve that the body is in a relaxed and safe state, thus sending messages to the brain to let it know it's ok to relax. Positive, loving thoughts are also highly beneficial for vagus nerve activity, so try a Buddhist Loving Kindness meditation.

Building up a daily practice has been shown to be really helpful.

Gut Health

The brain and gut are in constant communication via the vagus nerve. Which is why gut health and mental health are so intrinsically linked. In fact, research shows that when it comes to people with food sensitivities, anxiety, gut problems, brain fog and depersonalisation, a poorly functioning vagus nerve is often at play.

Having a good balance of healthy gut bacteria has been shown in numerous studies to positively affect the vagus nerve and contribute to better brain health. If you suffer with digestive issues – reflect upon whether these bouts of indigestion or stomach issues tend to be accompanied by mood swings or brain fog. If the answer is 'yes', it's time to take greater care of your gut, as over 80% of our immune system is actually located within it! Taking a good quality probiotic can help improve gut bacteria, as can including more pre and probiotics in your meals – think sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha or kefir. Practices like occasional fasting, ensuring you're not eating too late at night, and cutting down on refined sugar can also have a positive impact upon gut health, thus reducing anxiety and stress too!

Gargling and Gag Reflex Activation

Both of these activate the VN so try to do at least twice a day when washing your teeth.

Cold Shower or Swim

Taking cold showers or open water swimming have become really popular - they help to relieve anxiety and stress, stimulate the vagus nerve, and promote healthy mitochondria (the 'engines' within each of our cells). If a full-on cold shower isn't possible, try splashing

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your face with cold water – especially when in the midst of a wave of worry or anxiety – as this has similar effects, or stepping outside for short amounts of time with minimal clothing in cold weather.

Getting out in the Sunshine

We all know that getting out in Nature is really good for us on so many levels. Specifically for the VN exposing our skin and eyes to sunlight helps to stimulate it. It is suggested we go out three times a day...just after sunrise, midday and just before sunset. Even 5mins at each of those times is helpful.

Therapy's

All of the following are suggested to specifically help the VN, ideally weekly (if you have heaps of money!!) or at least monthly...

- Yoga (daily obviously in my book!)
- Pilates
- Walking
- Massage (in class we have been massaging our abdominal area)
- Chiropractic care
- Visceral manipulation
- Reflexology

If you want to read more around this subject I can highly recommend the book “Activate Your Vagus Nerve - Unleash Your Body’s Natural Ability to Heal” by Dr Navaz Habib... it’s a very accessible read.

Hopefully there is enough here to remind you what you can do for yourself. Also I hope it helps you think about your over all health.

Finally...don’t forget to twiddle the ears! There’s a whole chapter on it in the book. Or get someone else to do it for you!