

Don't Hold Your Breath!

Have you ever thought about the advice given to patients following abdominal surgery not to lift anything heavy? If you consider what is happening when you hold a weight in front of you, it is the muscles of the back (and particularly the lower back) which are preventing you from collapsing forwards, so why is it so important for your abdomen?

The answer lies in what else you do when you lift something. Usually, while you are lifting something heavy, or using unusual force in any direction, you will hold your breath. Holding the breath (or technically, forcibly exhaling against a closed glottis), known as the Valsalva manoeuvre, has the effect of increasing the intra-abdominal pressure, and it is just about the worst possible treatment for an abdomen temporarily weakened by surgery. This increase in pressure is precisely what will generate the force to find a weak spot in your abdominal wall and push something through it, giving you a hernia.

Sportsmen lifting weights in the gym are always taught the correct breathing sequence as they lift a weight; this prevents breath-holding, and avoids the risk of excessive pressure in the abdomen causing a problem. In the same way, if you aim always to breathe out when exerting force, you will be avoiding the pressure increase. When you are doing "abdominal curls" to strengthen the *rectus abdominis*, the principal abdominal muscle on which your resistance to a hernia depends, think in terms of squeezing the air out as you curl, and it will come naturally to breathe out as you curl up. A useful reminder at all times is the "Grunt Rule" - if it makes you grunt, don't do it!

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