

THE SURPRISING BENEFITS OF HUMMING

Humming is something most of us do without thinking - while cooking, driving, or trying to relax. But this simple, instinctive behaviour may offer a range of measurable health benefits, from easing and improving our breathing to uplifting our mood and supporting cardiovascular function.

Can something so basic really be good for you? Emerging research suggests the answer is yes.

Humming is Wired into Us

From infancy, humming plays an important role in human connection. Caregivers often use soft vocalisations and lullabies to soothe babies and toddlers, long before language is understood. This early exposure highlights humming as one of our first forms of nonverbal communication.

When we examine various cultures, it's clear to see that humming has long been a vehicle for communication and self-soothing. Humming also serves as a subtle emotional signal - expressing contentment, discomfort, focus, or even mild embarrassment. Psychologically, it is tied to auditory mimicry which is an important learning mechanism: we often hum tunes we've heard repeatedly, a phenomenon related to 'earworms' (involuntary musical imagery).

What Happens in the Body When We Hum?

Humming is created by exhaling air through the nose while keeping the lips closed, producing a steady vibration in the vocal folds (commonly called vocal cords). This vibration does not just create sound - it also generates gentle internal resonance in the airways and skull.

These vibrations, combined with controlled breathing, are key to many of humming's physiological effects.

1. Humming and Stress Relief

One of the most well-supported benefits of humming is its ability to promote relaxation.

Humming stimulates the vagus nerve, a central component of the parasympathetic nervous system - the 'rest and digest' branch, responsible for calming the body after stress.

Activation of this system can:

- Lower heart rate
- Reduce blood pressure

- Promote relaxation
- Improve emotional regulation

Humming is also associated with increased heart rate variability (HRV), a key marker of resilience and cardiovascular health. Higher HRV generally indicates a better ability to adapt to stress.

The combination of slow breathing and vibration may also encourage the release of calming neurotransmitters such as serotonin and oxytocin.

2. Humming and Sinus Health

One of the most fascinating findings about humming involves its effect on the sinuses.

Research has shown that humming dramatically increases levels of nitric oxide in the nasal passages - up to 15-fold compared to quiet exhalation (Weitzberg & Lundberg, 2002).

Nitric oxide plays several important roles:

- It improves airflow in the nasal passages
- It has antimicrobial properties
- It enhances oxygen uptake in the lungs
- It supports blood vessel dilation

Because of this, humming may help:

- Reduce sinus congestion
- Support immune defence in the airways
- Improve breathing efficiency

Some small studies also suggest benefits for people with allergic rhinitis (seasonal or dust allergies), though more research is needed in this area to support these results.

3. Humming and Heart Rhythm

The slow, rhythmic breathing involved in humming helps regulate the autonomic nervous system - the balance between stress (sympathetic) and relaxation (parasympathetic) responses.

This can lead to:

- More stable heart rhythms

- Improved cardiovascular efficiency
- Greater resilience to stress

Humming acts as a gentle, built-in breathing exercise - similar to techniques used in meditation and biofeedback.

4. Humming and Mood

Humming does not just affect the body; it also influences the mind.

The act of producing sound and vibration can:

- Increase awareness of bodily sensations (interoception)
- Promote centring and reduce hypervigilance (stepping back from anxious thoughts)
- Trigger the release of endorphins

This combination can improve mood, reduce anxiety, and even help with pain perception.

There is also a behavioural component: humming often distracts from rumination and repetitive negative thinking, acting as a simple mental reset.

5. Humming, Chanting, and Breath Practices

Humming is closely related to traditional breathing and meditation practices.

One well-known example is Bhramari pranayama, a yogic breathing technique that involves producing a soft humming sound during exhalation. Studies suggest it can reduce heart rate, lower stress, and improve focus.

Similarly, the prolonged 'mmm' sound at the end of chanting 'om' creates sustained vibration, which may contribute to calm, focused mental states.

These practices are often associated with:

- Mindfulness
- Flow states
- Reduced anxiety and mental clutter

A Simple Way to Combine it With Breathing

If you want to experience the effects yourself:

1. Inhale slowly through your nose...
2. Exhale through your mouth with a gentle hum (mmm)...
3. Keep the sound steady and comfortable...
4. Repeat for 3 - 5 minutes.

With regular practice, you will notice a subtle shift in the quality of your breathing, a reduction in tension, and increased mental clarity.

Although humming may not be considered to be a particularly life-changing activity, it does sit at the intersection of breathing, sound, and nervous system regulation, and therefore should not be underestimated. Sometimes the most effective tools for well-being are the ones we so easily overlook and take for granted.

In Summary: Is Humming Good for You?

While humming isn't a cure-all, it's a low-effort, zero-cost, enjoyable practice with a surprisingly wide range of potential benefits:

- Supports relaxation and stress reduction
- Improves breathing and sinus function
- Enhances heart rate variability
- Boosts mood and emotional balance

Best of all, it requires no training and can be done anywhere; it is an entirely portable activity.

Key References

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