Kumbhaka: Breath Retention

Before you practice

These guides are general fitness and mindfulness content written by BLKMAT. They are not medical advice, therapy, or treatment, and they are not a substitute for a qualified yoga teacher or health professional.

- Check with a doctor or physical therapist before starting a new exercise routine, especially if you are pregnant, recovering from an injury or surgery, or managing a heart, blood-pressure, joint, or balance condition.
- Move within a comfortable range. Mild stretching sensation is fine; sharp, pinching, or electric pain, numbness, or dizziness means stop.
- If you feel faint, dizzy, short of breath, or unwell at any point, stop and rest. Get medical help if it doesn't pass quickly.
- Breathe through your nose if you can, and never hold your breath to force a pose.
- Use a wall, chair, folded blanket, or pillow for support whenever it helps. Props are not "cheating."
- Practice on a dry mat on a flat, non-slip floor. BLKMAT mats have a natural rubber base, which contains latex.

Zodiac and chakra themes in these guides are cultural and creative frameworks for choosing what to practice and what to pay attention to. They are not scientific or health claims.

A BLKMAT guide to Kumbhaka, breath retention. Read the whole page before you practice any of it. Read the safety note first.

What it is

Kumbhaka means “vessel”: the breath is held, the way water is held in a pot. Antara kumbhaka is the pause after an inhale; bahya kumbhaka is the pause after an exhale. Retention already appears in this category in short, structured doses (Sama Vritti, Viloma). This page is about practicing it directly — conservatively. Traditional practice pairs retention with the bandhas, the body locks; that is beyond this guide, and one more reason to learn in person.

Read this first

Retention is not a contest. Never hold the breath to the point of strain, gasping, pressure in the head or ears, or a racing heart. Do not practice retention if you are pregnant, have high or low blood pressure, a heart condition, glaucoma or another eye-pressure condition, epilepsy, or a history of fainting — unless your doctor has specifically cleared it. Never practice retention in water, in the bath, while driving, or standing up. Long holds are an advanced practice, traditionally learned one-to-one with a teacher; this guide deliberately teaches only short holds.

When to use it

Only within a seated practice, only after the other techniques in this category are comfortable, and only on a day when the breath is already smooth. Retention is never practiced to a target number.

How to practice

1. Sit tall. Spend a few minutes on Dirga or Nadi Shodhana until the breath is slow and even.
2. Inhale for a count of 4.
3. Hold for a count of 2 — throat open, face and shoulders soft, no bracing or bearing down.
4. Exhale for a count of 4, completely smooth.
5. Breathe normally for 2–3 breaths. Repeat only if every part of the last round was easy.

6. Over weeks — not days — the hold can grow by a count at a time, and only while the exhale that follows it stays perfectly smooth.

Timing and counts

Starting ratio	The rule	Rounds
Inhale 4 · hold 2 · exhale 4	If you gasp, rush, or need a recovery breath, the hold was too long — shorten it	A few, inside a longer practice

Why people practice it

Tradition considers retention the heart of pranayama: in the pause, attention has nothing to follow but itself. That is the whole case for it — and it is a practice of months and years, usually learned with a teacher.

Take care

- The breath after a hold should be as smooth as the breath before it. If it is not, the hold was too long.
- Stop at once if you feel dizzy, faint, or panicky, and breathe normally until you feel entirely ordinary again.
- There is no benefit in hurrying. A two-count hold done softly teaches more than a long hold done with strain.

Related glossary terms

Pranayama · Bandha

Part of the Breathing Techniques category in the Practice Library.

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