

Common Yoga Poses

Child's Pose

The primary default pause position. It's a calming pose that allows you to rest and refocus before continuing to the next pose. It gently stretches your lower back, hips, thighs, knees, and ankles and relaxes your spine, shoulders, and neck.

Avoid: If you have knee injuries or ankle problems. Avoid also if you have high blood pressure or are pregnant.

Modify: You can rest your head on a cushion or block. You can place a rolled towel under your ankles if they are uncomfortable.

Concentrate: Focus on relaxing the muscles of the spine and lower back as you breathe.

How: Kneel on the floor. Touch your big toes together and sit on your heels, then separate your knees about as wide as your hips. Exhale and lay your torso down between your thighs. Broaden your sacrum across the back of your pelvis and narrow your hip points toward the navel, so that they nestle down onto the inner thighs. Lengthen your tailbone away from the back of the pelvis while you lift the base of your skull away from the back of your neck. Lay your hands on the floor alongside your torso, palms up, and release the fronts of your shoulders toward the floor. Feel how the weight of the front shoulders pulls the shoulder blades wide across your back. Stay anywhere from 30 seconds to a few minutes. To come up, first lengthen the front torso, and then with an inhalation lift from the tailbone as it presses down and into the pelvis.

Seated Half-Spinal Twist Pose

It can increase the flexibility in your back, while stretching the shoulders, hips and chest. It can also help relieve tension in the middle of your back.

Avoid: If you have a back injury.

Modify: If bending your right knee is uncomfortable, keep it straight out in front of you.

Concentrate: Lift your torso with each inhale, and twist as you exhale.

How: Sit up on the floor with your hands behind you for support. Straighten your legs out in front of you. Bend your right knee and place your right foot to the outside of your left knee. Inhale, lengthen your torso, exhale and twist toward your right, either hugging your right knee with your left arm or placing your left upper arm on the outside of your right leg near the knee. Take several breaths here, lifting up through the sternum on the inhale and twisting a little more on the exhale, keeping the upper back wide. Release the twist and try the other side.

Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose

It's thought to help with anxiety, arthritis, digestive problems, headache, high/low blood pressure, insomnia, migraine, mild depression, respiratory ailments, urinary disorders, varicose veins, menstrual cramps, premenstrual syndrome, and menopause.

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Avoid: If you have serious eye problems, such as glaucoma, or a serious back/neck problem.

Modify: You can use a sandbag and strap. The strap goes around your thighs, just above the knees. The sandbag is balance on your feet (it helps to reduce the tension on the lower back).

Concentrate: Keeping your thighs touching the wall

How: Sit with your left side against a wall, then gently turn right and lift your legs up to rest against the wall, keeping your back on the floor and your sitting bones close to the wall. You can remain in this position for 5 to 15 minutes.

Bridge Pose

A back-bending pose that stretches the muscles of the chest, back and neck. It also builds strength in the back and hamstring muscles.

Avoid: If you have a neck injury.

Modify: Place a block between your thighs to help keep the legs and feet in proper alignment. Or you can place a block under your pelvis if your lower back is bothering you.

Concentrate: While holding this pose, try to keep your chest lifted and your sternum toward your chin.

How: Lie on your back. Bend both knees and position your feet hip-width apart with your knees stacked over your ankles. Place your arms on either side of your body with the palms of your hands turned down to the ground. Spread your fingers wide. Lengthen the skin of your tailbone toward the front of your mat. Lift your hips up and hold the pose for 5 breaths.

Cat-Cow

This pose helps to stretch your back.

Avoid: If you suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome or have low back pain.

Modify: Place a cushion under your knees or ankles. Use blocks under your hands.

Concentrate: Arching your spine and drawing your navel upward.

How: Get on all fours, placing your palms underneath your shoulders and your knees underneath your hips. First, inhale, as you let your stomach drop down toward the floor. Then, exhale, as you draw your navel toward your spine, arching your spine like a cat stretching. Continue for 5 breaths.

Plank Pose

The pose helps build strength in the core, shoulders, arms and legs.

Avoid: If you suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome or have low back pain.

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Modify: You can modify it by placing your knees on the floor.

Concentrate: As you do a plank, imagine the back of your neck and spine lengthening.

How: Inhale and draw your torso forward until the arms are perpendicular to the floor and the shoulders directly over the wrists, torso parallel to the floor. Press your outer arms inward and firm the bases of your index fingers into the floor. Firm your shoulder blades against your back, then spread them away from the spine. Also spread your collarbones away from the sternum. Press your front thighs up toward the ceiling but resist your tailbone toward the floor as you lengthen it toward the heels. Lift the base of the skull away from the back of the neck and look straight down at the floor. Stay anywhere from 30 seconds to 1 minute.

Four-Limbed Staff Pose

A push-up variation that follows plank pose in a common yoga sequence known as the sun salutation. It builds strength in the arms, shoulders, wrists and back while helping tone the abdomen. It is a good pose to learn if you want to eventually work on more advanced poses, such as arm balances or inversions.

Avoid: If you have carpal tunnel syndrome, lower back pain, a shoulder injury or are pregnant.

Modify: It's a good idea for beginners to modify the pose by keeping your knees on the floor.

Concentrate: Press your palms evenly into the floor and lift your shoulders away from the floor as you hold this pose.

How: From plank pose, firm your shoulder blades against your back ribs and press your tailbone toward your pubis. With an exhalation slowly lower your torso and legs to a few inches above and parallel to the floor. There's a tendency in this pose for the lower back to sway toward the floor and the tailbone to poke up toward the ceiling. Throughout your stay in this position, keep the tailbone firmly in place and the legs very active and turned slightly inward. Draw the pubis toward the navel. Keep the space between the shoulder blades broad. Don't let the elbows splay out to the sides; hold them in by the sides of the torso and push them back toward the heels. Press the bases of the index fingers firmly to the floor. Lift the top of the sternum and your head to look forward. Practice for anywhere from 10 to 30 seconds. Release with an exhalation.

Cobra Pose

A simple back-bending pose used to strengthen the back muscles, increase spinal flexibility and stretches the chest, shoulders and abdomen.

Avoid: If you have arthritis in your spine or neck, a low-back injury or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Modify: Just lift up a few inches, and don't try to straighten your arms.

Concentrate: Try to keep your navel drawing up away from the floor as you hold this pose.

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How: Lie on your stomach with your legs straight. Firm up the muscles in your legs and have your feet hip-width apart and your toes pointing behind you. Push down through your pubic bone to avoid collapsing into the lower portion of the spine. Place your weight onto your forearms as you lift your chest away from the ground. Make sure that your neck is long as you look straight ahead. Hold for 5 breaths.

Downward-Facing Dog

The goal of this pose is to strengthen the arms, shoulders and back while stretching the hamstrings, calves, and arches of your feet. It can help relieve back pain.

Avoid: If you have carpal tunnel syndrome or other wrist problems, have high blood pressure or are in the late stages of pregnancy.

Modify: You can do the pose with your elbows on the ground, which takes the weight off your wrists. You can also use blocks under your hands, which may feel more comfortable.

Concentrate: Focus on distributing the weight evenly through your palms and lifting your hips up and back, away from your shoulders.

How: Come onto your hands and knees. Straighten your arms and relax your upper back between the shoulder blades. Keeping your knees bent, lengthen your knees and lift your hips high. Your aim here is to form the shape of an upside-down “V.” If you have the flexibility in your hamstring muscles, straighten your legs and let your heels drop down toward the floor while maintaining the length in your spine. If you notice your spine start to curve as you straighten your legs, bend your knees enough so that you can keep the spine long. Hold for 5 breaths.

Mountain

This pose improves posture, strengthens thighs, knees, and ankles, firms abdomen and buttocks, relieves sciatica, and reduces flat feet.

Avoid: If you have headache, insomnia, or low blood pressure

Modify: Check your alignment in this pose with your back against a wall. Stand with the backs of your heels, sacrum, and shoulder blades (but not the back of your head) touching the wall.

Concentrate: Maintaining balance

How: Stand with the bases of your big toes touching, heels slightly apart (so that your second toes are parallel). Lift and spread your toes and the balls of your feet, then lay them softly down on the floor. Rock back and forth and side to side. Gradually reduce this swaying to a standstill, with your weight balanced evenly on the feet. Firm your thigh muscles and lift the kneecaps, without hardening your lower belly. Lift the inner ankles to strengthen the inner arches, then imagine a line of energy all the way up along your inner thighs to your groins, and from there through the core of your torso, neck, and head, and out through the crown of your head. Lengthen your tailbone toward the floor and lift the pubis toward the navel. Press your shoulder blades into your back, then widen them across and release them down your back. Without

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pushing your lower front ribs forward, lift the top of your sternum straight toward the ceiling. Widen your collarbones. Hang your arms beside the torso. Balance the crown of your head directly over the center of your pelvis, with the underside of your chin parallel to the floor. Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute, breathing easily.

Tree Pose

It's designed to improve balance and strengthen the core, ankles, calves, thighs and spine.

Avoid: You may want to skip this pose if you have low blood pressure or any medical conditions that affect your balance.

Modify: Place one of your hands on a wall for support.

Concentrate: Focus on your breath in and out as you hold this pose.

How: Stand up straight. Focus on one spot in front of you. Shift your weight onto the left foot, keeping the inner part of your left foot firmly on the floor, and bend your right knee. Draw your right foot up and place the sole against your inner left thigh, inner calf muscle, or inner ankle with your toes touching the floor. Place your hands on the top rim of your pelvis to make sure that it's parallel to the floor. Lengthen your tailbone toward the floor. Firmly press the sole of the right foot against the inner thigh, calf, or ankle, and resist with the outer left leg. Raise your arms straight above your head. Ensure that you keep your shoulders relaxed. Hold for 5 breaths before changing to the other side.

Warrior I

This pose helps build focus, power, and stability. It stretches the front side of the body and is great for building strength in the legs, core and back.

Avoid: If you have high blood pressure, heart problems, shoulder problems, or neck problems.

Modify: Raise the back heel on a sandbag or other height.

Concentrate: Rotating your hips toward your navel which should allow you to lengthen your spine

How: Stand up straight and step your right foot back. Keep your front foot pointing straight forward and position your back foot at approximately a 45-degree angle. Position your feet hip-width apart so you're able to square your hips to the front of the mat. Bend into your front knee. Make sure your knee is directly above your ankle, or behind it. Keep your back leg strong. Raise your arms up straight above your head and relax your shoulders. Hold for 5 breaths before switching to the other side.

Warrior II

It energizes the body and mind, increasing concentration and stamina. It also strengthens the legs as it opens the chest and hips.

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Avoid: If you have high blood pressure. If you have neck problems, don't turn your head to look over the front hand; continue to look straight ahead with both sides of the neck lengthened evenly.

Modify: Position a metal folding chair outside your left leg, with the front edge of the chair seat facing you. As you bend the left knee to come into the pose, slide the front edge of the seat under your left thigh (taller students may need to build up the height of the chair seat with a thickly folded blanket). Repeat with the right leg bent.

Concentrate: Maintaining balance while lengthening your arms and legs.

How: Stand up straight. Step your right foot back. Keep your front foot pointing straight forward. Position your back foot at a little less than a 90-degree angle. Align your front heel with the arch of your back foot. Have your hips turned toward the side of the mat. Bend into your front knee so your knee is directly above your ankle, or behind it, ensuring the kneecap is tracking over the middle toe. Keep your back leg strong. Raise your arms up parallel with the ground. Relax your shoulders. Hold for 5 breaths before coming to the other side.

Warrior III

The pose strengthens the ankles and legs, strengthens the shoulders and muscles of the back, tones the abdomen, and improves balance and posture.

Avoid: If you have high blood pressure

Modify: Have a chair positioned in front of you, just a bit in front of your sticky mat (face the back of the chair toward you). When you stretch your arms forward, take hold of the top of the chair. As you rise up into the full pose, push on and slide the chair away from you and use it to support your arms. Try to hold the chair as lightly as possible.

Concentrate: Support the knee so it doesn't lock or hyperextend

How: Step your left foot back into a high lunge position. Your right knee should be at a right angle. From the lunge position, stretch your arms forward, parallel to the floor and parallel to each other, palms facing each other. Exhale and press the head of the right thighbone back and press the heel actively into the floor. Synchronize the straightening of the front leg and the lifting of the back leg. Your weight should remain on your heel. The arms, torso, and raised leg should be positioned relatively parallel to the floor. Extend the back leg strongly toward the wall behind you; reach just as actively in the opposite direction with the arms. Bring the head up slightly and look forward but be sure not to compress the back of your neck. Stay in this position for 30 seconds to a minute.

Triangle Pose

This is a part of many yoga sequences and helps build strength in the legs and stretches the hips, spine, chest, shoulders, groins, hamstrings, and calves. It can also help increase mobility in the hips and neck.

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Avoid: If you have a headache or low blood pressure.

Modify: If you have high blood pressure, turn your head to gaze downward in the final pose. If you have neck problems, don't turn your head to look upward; look straight ahead and keep both sides of the neck long.

Concentrate: Keep lifting your raised arm toward the ceiling. It helps keep the pose buoyant.
How: Engage your right thigh muscles and draw your right femur into its socket. Extend your right hand toward the front of the room, keeping your right hip tucked. Lower your right hand down onto your shin/ankle or floor. The left shoulder stacks on top of the right one as you open your chest, reaching your left fingertips toward the ceiling. Turn your head to take your gaze up toward your left fingertips. If this is uncomfortable for your neck, it's also fine to keep the head in a more neutral position. Continue to draw your right thigh muscles upward, deepening the crease in your right hip. Soften your right knee slightly to prevent hyperextension. Stay for at least 5 breaths. Repeat the pose with your left leg forward.

Corpse Pose

Classes typically end with this pose because it allows for a moment of relaxation. Some people find it difficult to stay still in this pose. However, the more you try this pose, the easier it is to sink into a relaxing, meditative state.

Avoid: No reason.

Modify: Place a blanket under your head, if that feels more comfortable. You can also roll up a blanket and place that under your knees, if your lower back is sensitive or bothering you.

Concentrate: Feel the weight of your body sinking into your mat one part at a time.

How: Lie down with your limbs gently stretched out, away from the body, with your palms facing up. Try to clear your mind while breathing deeply. You can hold this pose for 5 to 15 minutes. To exit, first roll gently with an exhalation onto one side, preferably the right. Take 2 or 3 breaths.