

# Adho Mukha Shvanasana



## Downward-Facing Dog

[uhd-HOE moo-KUSH-vuhn-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *adho* means “downward,” *mukha* means “face,” and *shvana* means “dog.” This asana is named Downward-Facing Dog because it resembles the pose that a dog strikes when stretching or, sometimes, when feeling playful.



### DESCRIPTION

Adho Mukha Shvanasana is practiced with the feet and hands pushing against the ground and the hips piked with the sit bones lifted high in the air. This posture is technically considered a resting asana, but for many who are just starting out in yoga it can be quite challenging because it requires considerable strength and flexibility in both the upper and lower body. The restful, rejuvenating effects of the pose become apparent after continuous practice. This pose is part of the Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskaras) series. Practicing this asana builds strength and flexibility in the arms and shoulders, which makes it a foundational pose for arm balances.

### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy, sixth chakra (Ajna) perceptive energy, seventh chakra (Sahasrara) divine energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into the metacarpal heads and fingertips. Anchor into the backs of the heels—even if the heels do not reach the ground. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

### BENEFITS

- Builds strength and stability in the shoulders.
- Stretches the hamstrings and deeper calf muscles that other stretches usually cannot affect.
- Stretches, strengthens, and improves circulation in the legs, making this posture especially beneficial for runners.
- Stretches the hands and feet.
- Rejuvenates the whole body.
- Builds a foundation for other inversion postures.
- Relaxes the heart.
- Increases blood flow to the head.
- Can relieve menstrual and menopausal discomfort.

### ⚠ CAUTIONS

**Shoulder dislocation**—If a student has a tendency toward shoulder dislocation, do not emphasize the external rotation of the shoulders. Instruct the student to focus on keeping the arms as straight and as comfortable as possible, perhaps slightly drawing the shoulders nearer to the ears. Also, see the modifications discussion for ways to build shoulder stability and strength.

**Wrist injury or carpal tunnel syndrome**—Students with wrist injury or weakness should practice this pose with modifications.

**Pregnancy**—Women who are new to the pose or past the first trimester of pregnancy should practice with modifications.

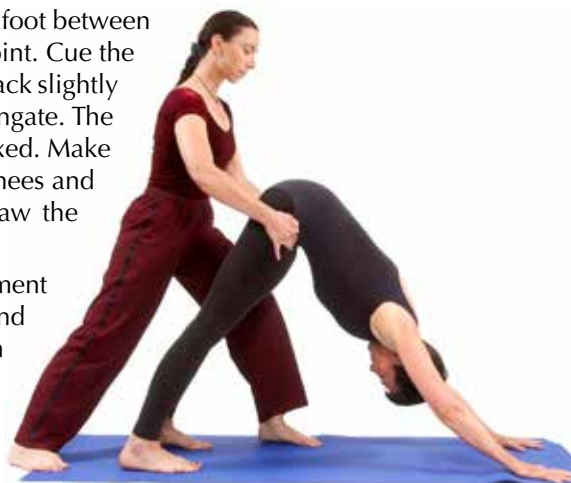
## VERBAL CUES

- From Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose), align your hands so that they are slightly farther than shoulder-width apart. Spread your fingers. Inhale to elongate your spine, then curl your toes under. Exhale and straighten your arms to lift your upper body off the ground. As you raise your hips toward the sky, press them back as far as is comfortable. Reach your heels toward the ground.
- Relax your neck. Inhale and imagine your shoulders moving away from your hands.
- Press firmly into your fingertips, taking weight out of the heels of your hands. Visualize pushing the earth away from your body. Feel the strength in your arms.
- Gently draw your upper arms in toward your ears. Inhale and rotate the backs of your upper arms slightly toward the ground. To minimize the possibility of hyperextending your elbows, soften them slightly while still contracting your upper arm muscles. Feel your shoulders and chest open and your spine lengthen with greater traction. Imagine more space between your vertebrae with each breath.
- Press your thighbones (femurs) back and continue to ground through your heels. It is okay if your heels do not touch the ground; simply focus on lengthening your legs and lifting your sit bones.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- As you breathe in, feel the energy in your hands and arms, as well as the weight of your head providing traction to your spine. Envision opening more space between your vertebrae.
- To exit this position from the Classical Sun Salutation, step one foot forward between your hands, coming into a lunge.
- To exit this position from an Ashtanga Sun Salutation, walk or jump both feet forward between your hands into Uttanasana (Intense Forward Bend).
- Otherwise, flow into another pose. If you need to rest, bend your knees, place them on the ground, and relax in Balasana (Child's Pose).

## ADJUSTMENTS

**Hips**—Stand behind the student in a semi-lunge, with your front foot between the student's legs. Place one hand on the outside of each hip joint. Cue the student to ground through the hands and inhale while leaning back slightly and lifting the hips back. The student's whole torso should elongate. The arms will be relieved of some workload and will feel more relaxed. Make certain that your own body mechanics are sound: bend your knees and use your body weight, rather than your back strength, to draw the student back.

**Spine**—If the student's upper spine is rounded, perform the adjustment described for the hips. You may also stand to the student's side and place a palm lightly between the student's shoulder blades with your fingers pointed toward the hips. Gently press your hand upward in the direction of the pelvis, thus encouraging the student to lengthen the spine; however, do not actually slide your hand, but simply simulate the direction the pelvis should move to give the student a kinesthetic feel for the motion you are indicating.



Adjustment: hips; spine.

**Neck**—Make sure that the student's neck is relaxed. Cue the student to lower the crown of the head toward the ground. To encourage the student to lower the head, place a hand gently on the back of the neck.

**Shoulders**—Encourage the student to rotate the shoulders externally. Because the student is upside down, it may be challenging for you to recognize the correct direction in which to adjust. It is crucial that you rotate the arms

in the correct direction. Stand or squat facing the student's head. Place your hands on the student's upper arms, just below the shoulders, with your thumbs closest to the head. Very slowly rotate the student's arms so that your thumbs move away from each other and the student's elbows draw in closer. Make certain that the student keeps pressing the palms firmly and securely into the ground.

**Hands and fingers**—Students often rotate the hands inward or outward to adjust for shoulder or wrist tightness. Cue students to point the middle finger directly forward, away from the body. If this positioning is difficult, instruct students to use modifications. Some students place most of the pressure on the hands to the outside, on the pinky, with very little weight on the rest of the hand. To adjust, kneel or squat beside the student and lightly press on the tops of the index finger and thumb in order to encourage the student to anchor into those joints.



Adjustment: shoulders.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Arm, wrist, or shoulder weakness**—Instruct the student to bend the elbows and place the forearms on the ground. This positioning is more challenging for the shoulder joint but serves as a good modification for anyone who cannot support the body weight fully on the hands. This position is often considered a pose in and of itself—namely, Dolphin Pose, sometimes translated as Makarasana (muh-kuh-RAH-suh-nuh). It is a good preparatory pose for Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Headstand).

**Hip, hamstring, or back tightness**—Cue the student to bend the knees slightly while continuing to lift the hips. Suggest that the student move the feet farther apart, since doing so often helps with balance and can change the angle of pull in the hamstrings.

**Pregnancy, extreme weakness, or tightness in the upper extremities**—Place the student facing a wall with the hands at shoulder height. Instruct the student to position the body at arm's-length from the wall while keeping the hands in place. Next, cue the student to bend forward from the hip joint and step back so that the feet are under the hips. Direct the student to push into the wall so that the hips shift back as far as is comfortable. The spine is now free to suspend, opening the shoulders and chest, and the head can relax between the upper arms. An alternative pose is Durga-Go (Cat and Cow Pose).



Modification: pregnancy, extreme weakness, or tightness in upper extremities.

**Fatigue**—Because this asana is physically demanding, many students are unable to stay in the position for very long. Encourage such students to rest in Balasana (Child's Pose).

## KINEMATICS

The arms and legs gain considerable strength from practicing this asana. Weakness in the posterior shoulder muscles and upper back can combine with tightness in the anterior shoulder muscles and chest to constrict the nerve and blood vessel plexus that supplies the arms and wrists. Therefore, imbalance in the upper body can be a contributing factor if a student complains of numbness or pain in the wrists during day-to-day activities. Adho Mukha Shvanasana is an excellent pose for balancing the shoulders and back and for opening the chest.

## Adho Mukha Shvanasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension, stability	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, flexor digitorum longus, and flexor hallucis longus (C, I)	
	Toe abduction, stability	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum, and hallucis longus (C, I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	Hamstrings
Hip and pelvis	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris (C, I)	Gluteus maximus, deep external rotators*
	Hip internal rotation and stability	Adductors, gluteus medius, gluteus minimus (C, I)	
	Pelvic stability	Rectus abdominis, quadratus lumborum, hamstrings (I)	
Torso	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis, quadratus lumborum, erector spinae (I)	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum
Shoulder	Humerus flexion and hyperflexion, stability	Pectoralis major, coracobrachialis, deltoids, biceps brachii (C, I)	Pectoralis major, latissimus dorsi, levator scapulae
	Scapular stability, external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Joint stability	Subscapularis, supraspinatus (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (I)	
	Scapular stability, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
	Scapular stability and abduction	Serratus anterior, teres major (C, I)	
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension, stability	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm pronation, stability	Pronator teres, quadratus (C, I)	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus
	Wrist hyperextension, stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (E, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension, stability	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck relaxed	None	Cervical erector spinae, splenius capitis and cervicis

\*Obturator externus and internus, gemellus superior and inferior, quadratus femoris, and piriformis.

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.

# Salamba Sarvangasana



## Supported Shoulderstand

[saah-LUM-buh sahr-vaahng-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *sa* means “with,” *alamba* means “support,” *sarva* means “all,” and *anga* means “limb.” In this pose, almost all of the body weight is supported by the upper body, specifically the upper spine, upper arms, shoulders, and back of the head. The pose is also practiced in unsupported variations, such as *Niralamba* [neer-aah-LUM-buh] Sarvangasana. Shoulderstand is often considered the queen or mother of all asanas because it is both active and restorative.

### DESCRIPTION

In Salamba Sarvangasana, the shoulders rest directly on the ground, or on a prop. The upper arms are behind the back in a supportive position, and the hands are positioned on the back to provide greater lift. The neck is flexed so that the chin and chest are close together.

### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into the backs of the upper arms and the upper shoulders. Anchor into the back of the head.

### BENEFITS

- Soothes the nervous system and the mind, thus relieving stress and mild depression.
- Stimulates the thyroid gland.
- Aids digestion.
- Stretches the shoulders and neck.
- May relieve menopausal symptoms.
- Reduces fatigue and may help alleviate insomnia in some people.
- Beneficial for relieving symptoms of asthma, infertility, and sinusitis.

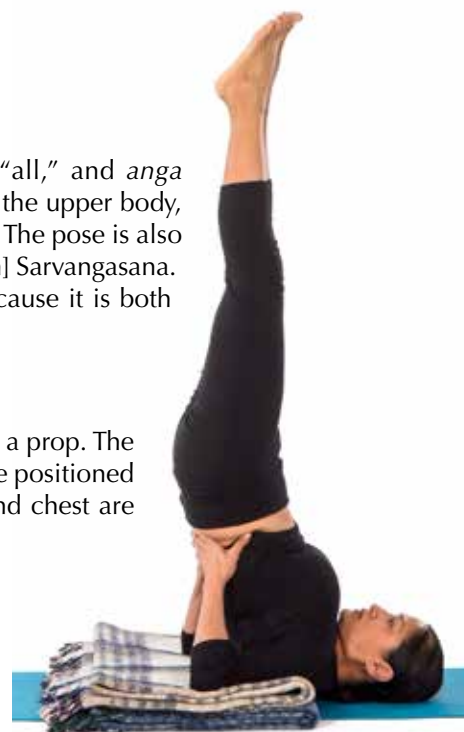
### ⚠ CAUTIONS

**Acute neck or shoulder injury**—Practice with modification or substitute another asana.

**Pregnancy**—Women who are new to yoga should not practice this pose after becoming pregnant. Those who are experienced with the pose may practice it through the second trimester.

### VERBAL CUES

- Lie supine with your torso and shoulders on a folded blanket. Position your neck and head to rest off of the blanket, on the ground. Bring your arms to your sides and, as you exhale, draw your knees in toward your chest. Press into your hands, roll your body weight toward your shoulders, and, if you can, lift your hips slightly off the ground. Keep your hips aligned with your shoulders.
- Inhale and anchor into your shoulder blades. As you exhale, press into your arms more energetically and lift your hips higher while raising more of your spine off the ground.



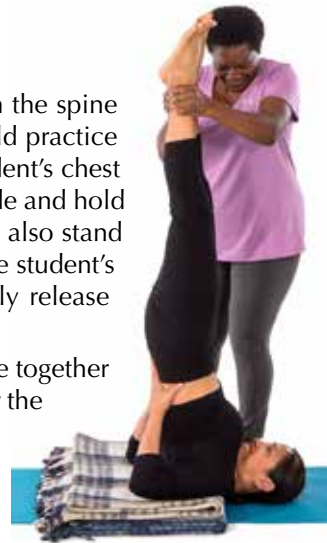


- If you feel stable in this position, bring your palms, with your fingers pointed up toward your feet, to your back as close to your shoulder blades as is comfortable. Inhale and draw your elbows slightly closer together. Breathe smoothly.
- On your next inhalation, straighten your legs and reach your feet toward the sky. Spread your toes and engage your leg muscles as if you were standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). As you elongate your legs, bring your hips into alignment over your shoulders as much as possible. As your hips and legs align, you will feel your chest move in closer to your chin.
- With each inhalation, open your chest and shoulders more so that your spine continues to lift. Anchor through your upper arms and reach through your toes.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit this pose, slowly bend your knees toward your chest. Round your back and gently roll your spine down onto the ground, one vertebra at a time, keeping your abdominal muscles active to support the movement. Use your hands and arms as support against the ground so that you do not tense or lift your neck.
- Another option is to bend from your hips, then slowly lower your feet to the ground into Halasana (Plow Pose). Matsyasana (Fish Pose) is often used as a counter pose.

## ADJUSTMENTS

**Chest**—Many students can lift the legs but cannot easily straighten the spine or align the hips. As they build flexibility and strength, they should practice a variation of the pose (see the modifications discussion). If a student's chest is collapsing (that is, if the upper back is rounding), stand to the side and hold onto the ankles with your hands. If the student is stable, you may also stand in front of the heels. You may also place your lower leg against the student's spine to offer more support. Once the student feels stable, slowly release your grasp and step away.

**Elbows**—To help straighten the spine, the elbows should be as close together as possible. You can assist by holding onto the legs as described for the chest adjustment and cueing the student to squeeze the elbows closer together. You can also kneel to the side of the student and, as the student lifts the legs, gently guide the elbows together by pressing lightly on the outsides of the upper arms.



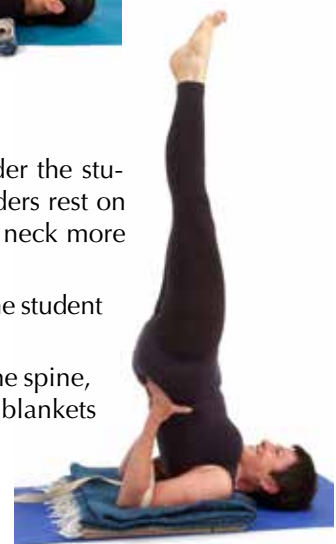
Adjustment: chest.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Difficulty with lifting the torso**—Place a slightly higher stack of folded blankets under the student's shoulders so that the back of the head still touches the ground and the shoulders rest on the blankets. This modification positions the shoulders higher and helps stretch the neck more effectively. Some styles of hatha yoga teach this variation only.

**Drifting elbows**—If the student's elbows splay, the foundation is compromised. To help the student maintain alignment, wrap a strap around the upper arms just above the elbows.

**Balance concerns**—If the student has difficulty balancing the body while lengthening the spine, place folded blankets on the ground near a wall so that the student's torso rests on the blankets and the backs of the legs are against the wall. The back of the head should rest on the ground. Instruct the student to place the feet flat against the wall and "walk" up it so that the body weight is placed at the top of the shoulders. When comfortable, the student can move the legs away from the wall and practice balancing, either on one leg at a time or on both at the same time.

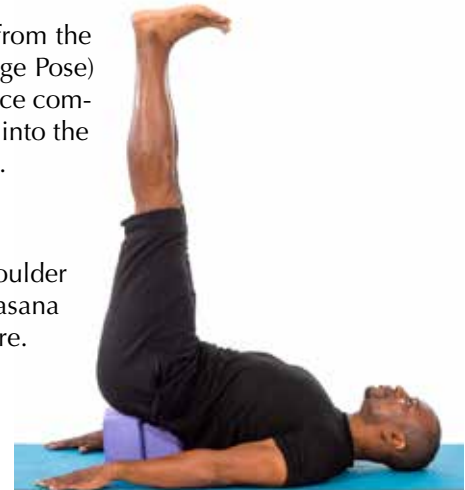


Modification: drifting elbows.

**Assistance with props**—If a student has difficulty lifting the legs directly from the ground, cue the student to come into an assisted Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose) and raise the legs off the ground while resting the pelvis on the block. Once comfortable, the student can lift the pelvis off the block and move more fully into the pose. Make certain to remove the block before the student exits the pose.

## KINEMATICS

Salamba Sarvangasana is an excellent pose to gently loosen the neck and shoulder joints. In addition, because of the gentle pressure on the thyroid gland, this asana helps enhance the function of the gland and may help lower blood pressure.



Modification: assistance with props.

## Salamba Sarvangasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Femur adduction	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
	Hip stability	Iliopsoas (I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Humerus hyperextension, stability	Posterior deltoid, triceps brachii, latissimus dorsi, teres major (C, I)	Pectoralis major and minor, anterior deltoid, serratus anterior
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction, depression, and stability	Rhomboids, mid and lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachioradialis, brachialis, (C, I)	
	Arm stability	Triceps brachii (I)	
Lower arm	Forearm supination, stability	Supinator (I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (I)	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck flexion, stability, jalandhara bandha	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes, hyoids (C, I)	Cervical erector spinae, splenius capitis and cervicis, upper trapezius

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.



# Pincha Mayurasana

## Peacock Feather Pose

[PIN-chuh may-oohr-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *pincha* means “feather,” and *mayura* means “peacock.” The asana resembles a peacock with its tail feathers lifted and spread before its mating dance.

### DESCRIPTION

This arm balance strongly uses the same shoulder-stabilizing muscles used in Salamba Shirshasana (Supported Headstand); here, however, the head and neck do not support any body weight. Students often progress from Pincha Mayurasana into the more physically demanding Vrschikasana [vr-ISHICK-AAH-suh-nuh] (Scorpion Pose). In that pose, the arm balance remains the same, but the hips hyperextend, the knees flex, and the feet sink closer to the back of the head.

### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, Fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy, sixth chakra (Ajna) perceptive energy, seventh chakra (Sahasrara) divine energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the elbows and forearms. Anchor into the hands.

### BENEFITS

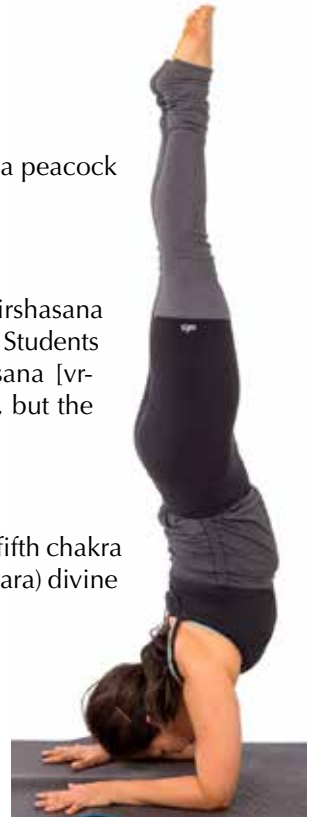
- Strengthens and stabilizes the shoulders and the mid and upper back.
- Maintains shoulder flexibility.
- Strengthens the low spine.
- Stretches and tones the abdominal muscles.
- Energizes the body and mind.
- Increases circulation, concentration, and balance.

### ⚠ CAUTION

**Neck, shoulder, or back injury**—Students with acute injury in any of these areas should refrain from practicing this pose.

### VERBAL CUES

- From Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), bring your forearms to the ground. Place your palms flat against the ground and align them with your shoulders. Spread your fingers to widen your base of support. Maintain the alignment of your elbows with your shoulders. Feel your hands and arms root into the support of the ground.
- Inhale and press firmly down through your elbows. Shift your body weight back slightly more toward your shoulders while also pressing the center of your chest back toward your legs. This action lifts and expands your chest and activates the muscles needed to help you balance.
- Slightly hyperextend your neck so that you focus your gaze on a *drishti* (gazing point) in front of your hands. Keep your breath smooth and steady.
- Remain focused on your *drishti* point as you begin to walk your feet forward slightly. As your torso moves forward, keep your shoulders in line with your elbows. To help with this alignment, press your chest toward your





legs. Continue to press firmly into your forearms and keep your upper arms perpendicular to the ground. Maintain length in the front and back of your neck.

- Exhale and slowly raise one leg and then the other, pressing into your arms for leverage. Try not to “kick” your legs up; raise them in a controlled manner to maintain your balance. When both legs are raised, reach your toes toward the sky and feel your torso stretch from your shoulders to your hips. Spread your toes to help maintain energy in your legs.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- If you feel comfortable in Pincha Mayurasana and would like to move into Vrschikasana, continue to breathe smoothly and press firmly through your forearms. On an exhalation, slowly bend your knees and press your chest toward the line of your gaze, as if you were going to reach your heart out beyond your hands. Maintain length in your neck.
- Exhale and arch your back slightly so that your feet move closer to your head. Feel your abdomen and front thighs elongate and open while continuing to support your balance. Maintain length in your low back and keep your throat open as you continue to focus on your *drishti*.
- To exit this position, exhale and flex your hips. Lower your feet slowly back to the ground. Fold your body into Balasana (Child’s Pose) and relax.



Vrschikasana.



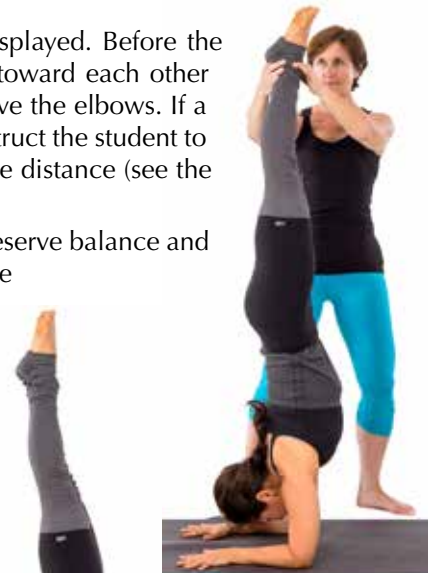
Entering Pincha Mayurasana.

## ADJUSTMENTS

**Elbows**—Make sure the student’s elbows are shoulder-width apart and not splayed. Before the student begins to balance, kneel to the side and gently guide the elbows toward each other with your hands; alternatively, wrap a strap around the upper arms just above the elbows. If a student struggles with arm placement, place a block against the wall and instruct the student to place the hands to the outside of the block and align the elbows at the same distance (see the modifications discussion).

**Head and neck**—Remind the student to maintain head position in order to preserve balance and stability in the shoulders. Kneel beside the student, place one hand behind the back of the head, and cue the student to move the head toward your hand.

**Spotting**—Stand to the student’s side. As the legs lift, use your forearms to act as a block in front of and behind the lower thighs, so that the legs do not drop to the other side of the body. Ideally, you act not as a crutch but as a training wheel. It is best not to hold the legs up; instead of supporting the pose for a student, help the student find and then independently maintain her or his own balance. To help a student attain more length in the torso, stand to one side and lightly wrap your hands around the ankle, lifting slightly. Again, try not to provide too much of the student’s balance. *Always* stand to the side of a student! Otherwise, there is a large possibility that the student will come crashing down onto your body.



Adjustment: spotting.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Balance concerns**—In contrast to Salamba Shirshasana, it is most appropriate to practice Pincha Mayurasana using the wall as a supportive prop.

**Difficulty in maintaining arm position**—Place a block against the wall, or, if the student has adequate balance, away from the wall, and instruct the student to kneel facing the wall with the thumbs pressed against the near surface of the block and the index fingers on the sides. Cue the student to press firmly into the block and hug the elbows toward each other while practicing the leg lifting.



Modification: balance concerns; difficulty maintaining arm positioning.

## KINEMATICS

If the student positions the elbows farther than shoulder-width apart, the foundation of the asana is compromised. Consider that if a structure is balanced on stilts positioned farther apart than the width of the building's base, the building collapses through the middle; a body on an unstable base does the same. This alignment is also important for protecting the shoulder joints from possible injury.

### Pincha Mayurasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (I)	
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee flexion	Quadriceps (E, I)	Quadriceps
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	Iliopsoas
	Hip stability	Iliopsoas (E, I)	
Torso	Torso stability, spinal hyperextension	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (E, I)	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques
	Spinal stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Humerus flexion, shoulder stability	Pectoralis major, coracobrachialis, deltoids, biceps brachii (C, I)	Latissimus dorsi
	Stability	Latissimus dorsi (I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (I)	
	Joint stability	Subscapularis (I)	
	Scapular depression	Subclavius (I)	
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius, serratus anterior (I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (C, I)	
	Elbow stability and balance	Biceps and triceps brachii (I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator quadratus and teres (C, I)	
	Elbow stability	Triceps brachii (I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension, stability	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (I)	
	Hand and wrist stability and balance	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (C, I)	Sternocleidomastoid

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.

# Adho Mukha Vrkshasana



## Downward-Facing Tree, or Handstand

[uhd-HOE moo-KUH vrick-SHAAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *adho* means “downward,” *mukha* means “face,” and *vrksha* means “tree.” In this pose, the length and strength in the body resemble that of a tree, and the hands serve as the roots.

### DESCRIPTION

Adho Mukha Vrkshasana is a basic handstand—that is, an arm balance—in which the hands are placed on the ground and the rest of the body straight up in the air. This asana can be practiced against a wall by students who are new to the pose or feel fearful of it. Once a student succeeds in that version of the pose, she or he should practice without the aid of a wall.

### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Sixth chakra (Ajna) perceptive energy, seventh chakra (Sahasrara) divine energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the metacarpal heads and fingertips. Anchor into the balancing energy within your abdomen.

### BENEFITS

- Strengthens the shoulders, arms, and wrists.
- Opens the chest and rib cage.
- Strengthens the abdominal and spinal muscles.
- Increases confidence, focus, and balance.
- Invigorates the nervous system.

### ⚠ CAUTION

**Pregnancy**—Women who are new to yoga should not practice this pose after becoming pregnant. Those who are experienced with the pose may practice it through the second trimester.

### VERBAL CUES

Note: The cues for this asana are designed for students who are new to the pose and possess adequate shoulder strength and flexibility but may worry about trying the pose without the reassurance of a wall for support. Some students may wish to practice without the aid of a wall, which is totally acceptable.

- Stand facing a wall at a distance of two to four feet (roughly one-half to one meter). Exhale and fold forward from your hips, placing your hands flat on the ground one to three feet (no more than a meter) from the wall. Make certain that your hands are shoulder-width apart. Spread your fingers wide and press into your fingertips.



Entering Adho Mukha Vrkshasana.

- Keep your arms straight as you look toward the ground in front of your hands, focusing your gaze on a spot between your hands and the wall. Take a deep breath in and imagine energy from the ground moving up from your hands into your entire body.
- Exhale and slowly lift your legs one at a time. If your feet land on the wall, feel free to connect into your heels and use the wall as a prop. Take a couple of breaths and anchor into your hands.
- If you feel comfortable in this position, experiment by slowly bringing one heel away from the wall. Press up through your toes, energizing your legs by squeezing the inner thighs together. If you feel balanced, slowly take your other heel off the wall. Find the edge of your balance by using the wall as a sort of training wheel.
- Use your hands to help direct the movement of your body. Bring your ankles in line with your hips as your balance moves more fully onto your hands. Continue to press your thighs together and press the front of your ribcage back toward your spine. This action will keep the abdominals engaged and help maintain alignment and balance.
- Continue to focus on your breath
- Continue to focus your gaze toward the wall and spread your toes. Imagine reaching your feet into the sky.
- Your breath should be as smooth and deep as possible. If you feel you are straining to maintain the position, slowly take your feet back to the ground.
- To exit, slowly lower your legs back to the ground one at a time. Come to the ground into Balasana (Child's Pose) to rest.

## ADJUSTMENTS

**Hand alignment**—Make certain that the student's hands are shoulder-width apart. As in Pincha Mayurasana (Peacock Feather Pose), the arms in Adho Mukha Vrksasana act like stilts under a house. The hands and shoulders must remain aligned to support the weight of the body and prevent injury in the supporting joints.

**Assistance or spotting**—Stand to the side of the student and use your hands or the inside of your forearm as a “leg-stop” so that the student does not fall over backward. Do not hold the student's legs up; if you do, the student will not sense when the body is properly aligned and balanced.

**Low back**—If the low back arches significantly, stand beside the student, place your hand between the knees or calves, and direct the student to squeeze your hand. As in Pincha Mayurasana (Peacock Feather Pose), always stand to the side of the student for your own protection. Tell the student to imagine that the hands are pushing the ground away and that the energy from the ground is moving through the body toward the toes.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Difficulty with maintaining balance**—Instruct the student to keep the heels resting against the wall and to focus on gaining the strength and stability needed in the shoulders and spine to maintain balance. As the student feels more comfortable, cue to take one leg, then the other, away from the wall.

**Variations of exit**—If the student is steady in the pose and no longer relies on a wall for support, then instead of bending the hips and lowering the legs to the ground in front of the body, the student can slowly arch the back and lower the legs behind into a backbend. This variation applies only if the student practices away from the wall and has the strength and flexibility to move in such a manner.

## KINEMATICS

Maintaining the elongated hyperextension in the neck helps preserve the openness in the upper chest and also helps keep the legs from dropping forward.



Adjustment: assistance or spotting.



Modification: difficulty with maintaining balance.

## Adho Mukha Vrkshasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (I)
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension	Hamstrings (C, I)
	Hip stability	Iliopsoas (C, I)
	Hip adduction	Adductors (C, I)
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)
Shoulder	Humerus flexion, stability	Pectoralis major, coracobrachialis, deltoids (C, I)
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid, latissimus dorsi (C, I)
	Joint stability	Subscapularis (I)
	Scapular depression, stability	Subclavius (I)
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius, serratus anterior (C, I)
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)
Upper arm	Elbow extension, stability	Triceps brachii (I)
	Arm stability	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (I)
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)
	Forearm extension	Anconeus (C, I)
Hand and fingers	Wrist hyperextension, stability	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris
	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (E, I)
	Finger extension, stability	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)
	Finger abduction, stability	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)
Neck	Neck extension	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (I)

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.





# *Salamba Shirshasana*

## Supported Headstand

[saah-LUM-buh sheer-SHAAH-suh-nuh]

*Salamba* means “with support,” and *shirsha* means “head” in Sanskrit. This pose is a headstand supported by the strength of the arms.

### DESCRIPTION

Shirshasana is considered the king of asanas and therefore is one of the most important poses in many styles of hatha yoga. This supported version puts the least stress on the head and neck because the majority of the body weight is supported by the forearms and shoulders. The crown of the head is cradled between the hands, and the back of the head rests against the interlaced fingers. Numerous headstand variations exist, and this is the best version for building the strength and stamina needed to accomplish all of the others.

### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Sixth chakra (Ajna) perceptive energy, seventh chakra (Sahasrara) divine energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the elbows and forearms. Anchor onto the crown of the head and the supporting hands.

### BENEFITS

- Increases stamina and strength in the shoulders, neck, abdominals, and upper spine and helps prevent bone degeneration in these areas.
- Creates good posture.
- Improves circulation.
- Massages the lungs and builds resistance to illness.
- Stimulates the pineal gland.
- Increases energy and body heat.
- Increases concentration and balance as it stimulates the pressure points at the Sahasrara chakra (crown of the head).



### CAUTION

**Pregnancy**—Women who are new to yoga should not practice this pose after becoming pregnant. Those who are experienced with the pose may practice it through the second trimester.

### VERBAL CUES

Explain to students that they may lose balance when practicing Salamba Shirshasana and that the fall is not nearly as painful or frightening as they might imagine, especially if they simply allow the body to relax on the way down. If a student does begin to fall, cue him or her to immediately tuck the chin to the chest. The most important—albeit most difficult—thing to do is relax! Before beginning, ask students to make sufficient space between one another and to clear the area completely of props and other gear.

- From a hands-and-knees position, bring your forearms to the ground in front of your knees. Align your elbows with your shoulders and loosely interlace your fingers. Place the backs of your little finger and ring finger against the ground. Release your thumbs so that they do not touch each other but instead rest on your index fingers. Inhale deeply.
- Exhale and draw your chin closer to your chest and lean your torso slightly forward to place the crown of your head in your palms. Press into your forearms to lengthen your neck so that your shoulders do not hunch toward your ears.
- Inhale and lift your knees off the ground, bringing your hips into the air. Your body positioning now resembles Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), with your forearms on the ground. This is a position called Dolphin Pose, or Makarasana. Pause here for a few breaths and create length in your spine, moving your chest and rib cage away from your arms. See preparatory position 1, Makarasana.
- Lift your heels off the ground and begin to slowly walk your feet toward your face. Maintain space in your spine, feeling your hips move toward alignment over your shoulders.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- When your hips are stacked over your shoulders, bend one knee and draw it to your chest. Continue to breathe deeply, pressing firmly into your forearms. As you do so, you may feel your opposite foot naturally begin to hover off the ground. Gradually, as you are comfortable doing so, bring your other knee toward your chest. Keep both knees bent and balance here, hugging your knees into your chest and pressing the inner thighs closer together. See preparatory position 2.
- If you can remain comfortably balanced with your knees into your chest for five or six breaths, you are ready to extend your legs. (For most students, this progress will come after a number of consistent practice sessions. Once a student has sufficient strength, she or he may enter the position by slowly raising and straightening both legs simultaneously.)
- Exhale and very slowly straighten your legs one at a time. *Move slowly and refrain from kicking your legs up; doing so will throw off your balance.* Stretch your toes up toward the sky. Be sure to move slowly and purposefully to maintain your balance.
- As you breathe in this position, focus on aligning your body in an upside-down Tadasana. Roll your thighs in toward each other slightly. Straighten your spine with each inhalation. Press firmly through your elbows to bring strength and stability to your shoulders.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit this posture, exhale and slowly bring your legs down to the ground with as much control as possible. Fold yourself into Balasana (Child's Pose) and rest.



Preparatory position 1, Makarasana.



Preparatory position 2.

## ADJUSTMENTS

Again, emphasize the importance of moving slowly. Control comes from building strength and coordination in the muscles and using them to lift the legs rather than using momentum, which generally takes the student out of alignment.

**Elbows**—Make sure that the student's elbows are shoulder-width apart and not splayed. If necessary, before the student begins to balance, kneel to the side and gently press the elbows toward each other. Some students may welcome a strap wrapped around the upper arms just above the elbows to help maintain alignment. Other students will find the strap distracting.

**Spine**—If the back starts to round as the student brings the feet toward the face while raising the legs, instruct the student to stop in that position. Stand in a semi-squat or kneel beside the student, place your hand on the rounded spine, and instruct the student to move the spine away from your hand. Cue the student to lengthen the entire torso with each breath.

**Chest and ribs**—If the student's chest and ribs flair out and the lower back hyperextends, stand beside the student and place your closest forearm in front of the thighs for support. Place your other hand around the backs of the ankles and instruct the student to press more firmly into the arms while reaching the toes to the sky. Gently guide the feet upward while encouraging the thighs to move into alignment. Move subtly so as not to disturb the student's balance. Cue the student to press the ribcage toward the spine, and to engage the abdominal muscles to aid in alignment.

**Initial balance assistance**—Stand to the side of the student in a semi-squat position for your own comfort and safety. As the student brings one or both of the knees into the chest, use your forearm to stop the student from rolling over. When you feel that the student is balanced on her or his arms, slowly remove your arm.

**Straight-leg balance assistance**—Stand to the student's side and use the inside of your arm as a "leg-stop" so that the student does not lose balance and roll onto the back. Do not hold the legs; if you do, the student cannot get a feel for proper alignment and balance. This assistance is simply to help the student recognize when the legs are perpendicular to the ground.

**Strength building**—To aid the student's alignment and strength, stand to the side, place your hand between the knees, and cue the student to squeeze your hand while lifting it toward the sky. This adjustment teaches the student to lengthen and lift more actively in the posture.



Adjustment: chest and ribs.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Students who are determined yet slightly fearful**—If a student is truly building the strength for the balance but feels disappointed in not yet being able to balance in the posture, place the student's back against a wall. Use this modification sparingly, so that students do not become dependent on the wall for the balance. As the student gains confidence, move him or her away from the wall and place one or two folded blankets to the back side for cushioning in case of a fall.

**Tight shoulders**—If the student has difficulty keeping the elbows aligned, a strap can be wrapped around the upper arms to keep the elbows from moving apart. This should be done in the preliminary stages of building the strength and flexibility for this posture.

**Upper-body strength building**—As the student builds strength in the upper body, balance may be achieved by bringing the knees into the chest and focusing on the balance in the arms. If the student loses balance, the forward roll comes naturally.

**Extreme weakness**—Instruct the student to practice Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) to build the needed arm and core strength.

## KINEMATICS

It is common for people new to Salamba Shirshasana to practice with the back against a wall. Unfortunately, it is highly possible to become dependent on the support provided by the wall and therefore never build the muscular coordination and balance needed to practice without the wall. With patience and practice, however, the student can learn to enter and exit this asana way from the wall, which not only builds muscle strength and endurance but also helps eliminate the fear felt by many students when they first attempt the asana. In addition, proper alignment reduces the intensity of isometric contraction in the torso and legs, thus making the pose more relaxing.

This is an excellent asana for building and maintaining vertebral strength in the neck. Some may argue that the neck is not designed to carry the load of the body; however, in many cultures throughout the world, people carry heavy loads balanced on the head. Proper postural alignment keeps the load balanced and strengthens the vertebrae and surrounding musculature. Moreover, because the majority of the body weight is borne by the arms in this pose, only a small percentage of weight is supported by the neck. If a student indicates soreness in the neck rather than in the arms, it is best for that student to practice modified versions of the pose in order to build strength in these joints and reduce pressure in the neck.

## Salamba Shirshasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (I)	
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Femur adduction	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
	Hip stability	Iliopsoas (I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Humerus flexion, stability	Pectoralis major, coracobrachialis, deltoids (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid, latissimus dorsi (C, I)	
	Scapular abduction and stability	Subscapularis, serratus anterior (I)	
	Scapular depression, stability	Subclavius (I)	
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius, serratus anterior (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Humerus flexion, shoulder stability	Biceps brachii, brachioradialis, brachialis (I)	
	Stability and balance	Triceps brachii (I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator quadratus and pronator teres (I)	
Hand and fingers	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (E, I)	
	Finger flexion	Flexor digitorum superficialis and profundus, lumbricales manus, interossei palmaris (C, I)	
	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension and stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, sternocleidomastoid, scalenes, levator scapulae, upper trapezius (I)	

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.



# Halasana

## Plow Pose

[huhl-AAH-suh-nuh]

*Hala* is the Sanskrit word for plow. In Halasana, the shape of the body resembles that of a traditional plow utilized to till the earth; the legs represent the handles and the rest of the body the blade.

### DESCRIPTION

In this asana, as in Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand), the top of the shoulders and the back of the head are the roots. For the greatest benefit, the spine should be held as straight as possible, but it can be rounded in some variations. The hips are flexed, and the legs are outstretched as the feet rest on the ground behind the head.



### ENERGETIC FOCUS

Fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy

### FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the upper shoulders and the backs of the arms. Anchor into the tops of the feet.

### BENEFITS

- Stretches the neck, back, and shoulders.
- Can relieve indigestion.
- Promotes sound sleep.
- Stimulates the thyroid gland, abdominal organs, and digestion.
- Helps relieve menopausal symptoms.

### ⚠ CAUTIONS

**Asthma and high blood pressure**—Practice Halasana with the legs supported by a prop, such as a chair.

**Pregnancy**—Students who are experienced with this pose may continue to practice it late into pregnancy by using props for support. However, it is contraindicated to begin initial practice of the pose when pregnant.

**Back pain or other concern**—Students with a history of back pain or discomfort should practice this pose with modifications.

### VERBAL CUES

- From Salamba Sarvangasana, exhale and slowly lower one foot toward the ground beyond your head. On your next exhalation, lower your other leg in the same manner. Maintain length in both legs. If you are experienced in the pose and feel completely comfortable and strong, lower both legs at the same time.
- Keep your torso perpendicular to the ground and press strongly through your legs, as if you were standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Feel your inner thighs roll toward each other to keep your legs energized.
- With your toes resting on the ground, press into your upper arms and lift the bottom of your pelvis toward the ceiling. Continue to support the length of your back with your hands. Breathe slowly and smoothly.



- If you feel comfortable in your low back, release your hands from your back and straighten your arms behind you. To deepen the stretch in the chest and front shoulders, clasp your hands and draw your elbows closer together. Feel this action roll the fronts of your shoulders open, expanding your chest.
- Draw your chest toward your chin into jalandhara bandha (throat lock). Feel your energy relax in the neck and throat.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit this pose, unclasp your hands, if clasped, and press your palms into the ground. Keep your shoulders and neck completely relaxed as the back of your head remains on the ground. Move and breathe slowly.
- Bend your knees and bring them closer to your chest. Gently begin to roll your spine back to the ground while you use the leverage in your arms to help keep your shoulders and head resting against the ground.
- Pause when your hips first contact the ground and take a couple of breaths. Imagine your whole body sinking softly into the ground underneath you.
- Bring your feet the rest of the way to the ground and stretch your legs out. Take a breath or two and prepare for a counterpose or for Shavasana (Corpse Pose).

## ADJUSTMENTS

**Neck and shoulders**—Make sure that the student's chest does not collapse into the chin, which is common when the upper back is weak or the shoulders and neck are tight. Allow the student to use props (see the modifications discussion). However, do not allow the student place a pillow or other prop under the head; doing so compromises the neck by allowing it to overstretch or strain. To help the student maintain a long torso, kneel to the side and place your farthest foot near the shoulder blades. Align your inner thigh and calf along the length of the spine and cue the student to stretch the spine away from your leg.

**Hips and spine**—If the low back is rounded and the hips are positioned too far forward or too far back (rather than aligned with the shoulders), kneel beside the student as in the neck-and-shoulder adjustment, and guide the student to move the hips more into alignment. You can also use a pole, or even a broomstick, to illustrate length in the spine.

## MODIFICATIONS

**Tight hips or back**—If the student has difficulty lowering the feet to the ground, place a block, a stack of blankets, or a chair near a wall. Instruct the student to lie on the ground with the top of the head facing the wall and the prop and move into the pose according to the regular cues. Once the legs are lowered, they will rest on the prop rather than on the ground. The exact distance between the prop and the wall depends on the student's height (taller students are farther away).

**Weak or tight shoulders and back**—To aid the student and increase comfort, provide extra support by placing a folded blanket under the shoulders, as in Salamba Sarvangasana. You can also wrap a strap around the upper arms, above the elbows, to help keep the arms shoulder-width apart and stretch the chest and shoulders.



Modification: tight hips or back.

## KINEMATICS

Students often allow the back to round in order to stretch the entire spine. For many people, this feels great! However, do not allow the student to remain in this position for more than a breath or two; the misalignment—having the hips placed posterior to the shoulders and head—puts undue strain on the neck and upper-back vertebrae over time.

Some students will feel comfortable dorsiflexing the ankles and extending the toes so that the sole-side of the toes are on the ground. Others will prefer to plantarflex the ankles and flex the toes, as if they were "on pointe." This is an individual preference. The kinematics table below illustrates muscular activity in both positions.

## Halasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	Flexor digitorum longus and brevis, flexor hallucis longus
Foot and toes	Toe flexion	Flexor digitorum longus and brevis, flexor hallucis longus (C, I)	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis
Lower leg	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (C, I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
	Ankle plantarflexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Femur adduction	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip flexion	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (E)	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus
	Pelvic stability	Rectus abdominis, quadratus lumborum, hamstrings (C, I)	
Torso	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis, quadratus lumborum, erector spinae (C, I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Arm hyperextension	Posterior deltoid, triceps brachii, latissimus dorsi (C, I)	Pectoralis major and minor, anterior deltoid
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachioradialis, brachialis
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Elbow extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger adduction	Adductor pollicis, flexor pollicis longus and brevis, interossei (C, I)	
	Finger flexion	Flexor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis, dorsal interossei (C, I)	
Neck	Neck flexion, jalandhara bandha	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes, hyoids (C, I)	Cervical erector spinae, splenius capitis and cervicis, upper trapezius

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, and I = isometric contraction.