

Durga-Go



Cat and Cow Pose

[DUR-guh-go]

Cat and Cow pose has no official Sanskrit translation. Some schools of yoga use the Sanskrit term *Marjaryasana* because *marjara* means “cat.” The name *Durga-Go* was chosen because in Hindu belief, Durga is a warrior goddess who rode the back of a ferocious tiger; *go* is Sanskrit for “cow.”

DESCRIPTION

Durga-Go is a flowing pose practiced on the hands and knees. It moves the spine through a gentle range of flexion and hyperextension in the sagittal plane. The rounded, flexed position of the spine resembles a cat with its back arched, and the hyperextension in the spine is reminiscent of the sway in a cow's back.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

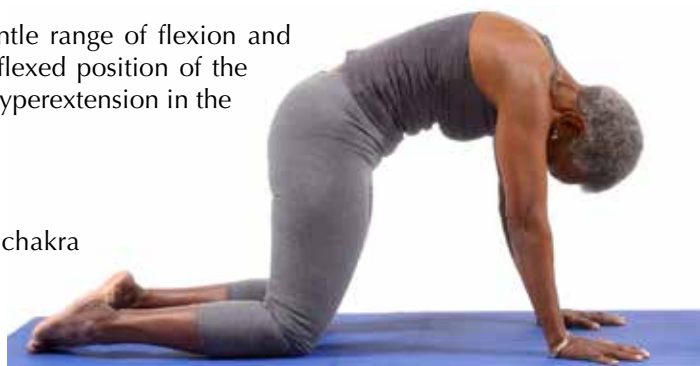
Root into the metatarsal heads and fingertips in both hands. Anchor into the knees and the tops of both feet.

BENEFITS

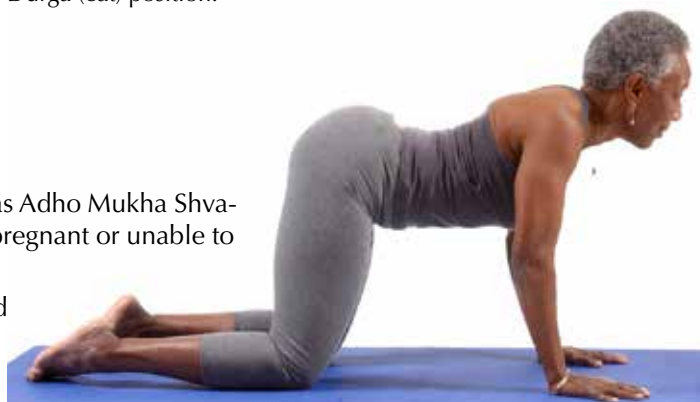
- Warms and stretches the spinal musculature.
- Provides a safe substitute for other poses, such as Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), when one is pregnant or unable to support the body weight with the arms.
- Loosens and relaxes the neck, upper back, and shoulders.
- Moves the energy with the breath.



Neutral position.



Durga (cat) position.



Go (cow) position.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Wrist concerns—Students with a wrist concern should practice with modifications.

Neck pain or injury—Students with neck pain or injury should keep the head aligned with the torso.

Lower back concerns—Students with acute lower back pain or injury should practice with modifications or move through a smaller range of motion.

VERBAL CUES

- Begin on your hands and knees. Place your hands under your shoulders and your knees under your hips. Maintain length in your neck and openness in your shoulders. Spread your fingers and soften your elbows slightly.

- Inhale and lengthen your spine. Stretch so that the crown of your head and your tailbone are as far away from each other as possible. Feel your breath expand through your entire torso. Imagine your back as a tabletop while keeping a strong torso.
- Exhale and tuck your lower pelvis downward as you draw your chin toward your chest. Draw your abdomen slightly in toward your spine and lift your mid spine toward the sky. Relax the space between your shoulder blades and feel your lower back stretch. This is the *durga* position.
- Inhale and move your spine back into the tabletop position. Feel your spine lengthen once again. With your next inhalation, press your hips back slightly as you point your tailbone toward the sky. At the same time, press your chest forward and up, with your chin slightly lifted. Arch your back as far as feels comfortable to you. Imagine your collar bones drawing apart as you open your chest and inhale deeply. Feel your abdomen lengthen and stretch. This is the *go* position. If your lower back feels uncomfortable, decrease your back arch slightly.
- Exhale and release your spine back to the tabletop (neutral) position.
- Repeat this cycle two or three times, or more, moving with the breath. Return to the tabletop position. Prepare for the next posture.

ADJUSTMENTS

Hands and knees—If the hands and knees are either too close together or too far apart, the student will have trouble flattening the back. Cue the student to adjust the distance accordingly.

Elbows—If the elbows are locked, the student will often internally rotate the upper arms and sink the head into the shoulders. To adjust, kneel or squat at the student's side, lightly grasp the upper arms near the shoulders, and rotate the elbows toward the rib cage.

Shoulders—Remind the student to maintain distance between the ears and shoulders. Gently tap the tops of the shoulders to cue the student to relax them.

Spine—To help a student achieve flexion in the spine, kneel or squat at the student's side and place your hand lightly on the middle of the back. Encourage the student to press the spine against your hand to lift it. To help the student hyperextend the spine, place your hand at the mid spine and instruct the student to move the spine away from your hand.

Breath awareness—When in the *durga* (rounded back) position, place your hand lightly on the mid spine and cue the student to direct the breath to that area, as if breathing the shoulder blades apart.

MODIFICATIONS

Feet and ankles—If the student has trouble balancing with the tops of the feet on the ground, instruct the student to curl the toes under for stability. You may also place a small rolled towel under the student's front ankles for comfort.

Wrist pain—Instead of cueing a student to place the hands on the ground, instruct the student to bend the elbows and place the forearms on the ground or on top of blocks. Another option is to place a chair in front of the student and invite her or him to place the forearms on the seat. Ideally, the chair should be at the student's shoulder height.

Variation for lateral movements of the spine—Cue students to remain in the same hands-and-knees position with the spine parallel to the ground, exhale, and squeeze the same-side hip and shoulder together. Instruct students to look over the shoulder on the side being flexed. Cue students to inhale and move back to straight spine, then exhale and move to the other side. Invite them to move rhythmically, with the breath, just as in the original pose.



Modification: wrist pain.

KINEMATICS

Hands-and-knees positioning is a transitional position for many other postures. The hands should remain directly beneath the shoulders and the knees directly under the hips to avoid putting undue shearing stress on the joints. The elbow joints should remain straight but not hyperextended.

Durga-Go

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum longus, extensor hallucis longus (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion, stability	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus, peroneals (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas (C, I)	
	Hip stability	Gluteus maximus, hamstrings, deep hip rotators (C, I)	
	Pelvic stability	Rectus abdominis, quadratus lumborum, hamstrings (I)	
Torso (<i>durga</i> phase)	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (C, I)	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum
	Spinal flexion	Rectus abdominis (C, I)	
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Torso (<i>go</i> phase)	Spinal hyperextension, stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis
Shoulder (both phases)	Flexion of humerus	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoids, coracobrachialis, biceps brachii (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Shoulder (<i>durga</i> phase)	Scapular abduction and stability	Subscapularis, serratus anterior (C, I)	Trapezius, rhomboids, latissimus dorsi
	Humerus adduction	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid (C, I)	
Shoulder (<i>go</i> phase)	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Forearm extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension, stability	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
	Finger extension, stability	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck (<i>durga</i> phase)	Initial neck flexion	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (E)	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius
	Neck flexion	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (C, I)	
Neck (<i>go</i> phase)	Neck hyperextension	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (C, I)	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes

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



Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana

Plank Pose

[oot-T-HEE-tuh chuh-tour-RUHN-guh duhn-DAAH-suh-nuh]

Utthita is the Sanskrit word for “extended,” *chatur* means “four,” *anga* means “limbs,” and *danda* means “staff” or “rod.” This pose is sometimes called Kumbhakasana [koom-BAHK-AAH-suh-nuh], or Breath Retention Pose, due to the short moment of breath holding before the torso is lowered toward the ground. The pose is also sometimes called Phalakasana [fuh-LUK-AAH-suh-nuh]. In Sanskrit, *phalak* translates as “guardian.” Some schools of hatha yoga refer to Phalakasana as a forearm plank.



DESCRIPTION

This posture essentially uses the extended-arm positioning of a push-up; it is a transitional movement in the Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskaras).

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the metatarsal heads and fingertips in both hands. Anchor the metatarsal heads of both feet. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

BENEFITS

- Prepares the body for variations of extended body postures—for example, Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbs Staff Pose) and Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana (Upward-Facing Dog).
- Builds strength in the shoulders, arms, back, legs, and abdominal muscles.
- Builds stability in the shoulders and core musculature.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Wrist concerns—Students with wrist injury or pain or carpal tunnel syndrome should use modifications.

Lower-back weakness—Students who have difficulty holding this pose should practice with modifications.

Pregnancy—After the first trimester, this pose should be practiced with modifications, and generally avoided in the third trimester.

VERBAL CUES

- From a low lunge, place your palms on the ground directly under your shoulders. Spread your fingers and press into your fingertips to lighten the pressure on the heels of your hands.
- Inhale and lengthen your spine as you open your shoulders and chest. Hug your upper arms in toward your rib cage. Soften your elbows slightly to keep them from hyperextending.
- Exhale and step your front leg back as you lift your back knee off the ground. Curl your toes under and straighten your legs. Press back through your heels and imagine touching the back wall.

- Slightly rotate your inner thighs toward each other to energize your legs. In your mind's eye, notice that your ears, shoulders, hips, knees, and ankles are aligned. Gaze down at the ground between your hands, lengthening the sides of your neck.
- Breathe deeply and slowly and apply uddiyana bandha (see chapter 5). On an energetic level, this action helps maintain energy; on a physical level, it helps support your abdomen and low back.
- Imagine pressing the ground away from your chest. This action helps keep your upper back elongated and your shoulder blades pressed against your spine.
- In the Sun Salutations, the body is next lowered toward the ground to continue the vinyasa (flow); the body is also in position to transition into many other postures.

ADJUSTMENTS

Heels—Make sure that the heels press back to keep the legs active. Lightly touch the backs of the heels to remind the student to press backward.

Hips—If a student's hips are lifted higher than the shoulders and knees, place your hand lightly, with no pressure, on the upper pelvis and instruct the student to move the hips away from your hand.

Shoulders—If the shoulders are not aligned over the hands, kneel to one side or in front of the student's head. With your hands on the student's upper shoulders, gently realign the student's body weight over the hands.

Shoulder blades—If the student's shoulder blades "wing" out (lift away from the back due to weakness), remind the student to press more firmly against the ground through the arms. Kneel beside the student, place your hand lightly between the shoulder blades, and instruct the student to press the body up against your hand.

Neck—Cue the student to look down toward the ground without dropping the head. The ears, shoulders, hips, knees, and ankles should be aligned. If any of the joints are sinking, gently touch the side of the joint and instruct the student to lift slightly.

MODIFICATIONS

Difficulty in finding alignment—Straddle the student's back and bend your knees as you lightly hold the sides of the student's hips and lift slightly to take some of the body weight.

Weakness—If the student is unable to maintain a straight spine in the position, instruct the student to keep the knees bent and on the ground and to focus on keeping the spine straight from the shoulders to the hips.

Wrist concerns—If the student cannot flex the wrists or put weight on them, instruct the student to flex the elbows and place the forearms on the ground or on blocks. Students can also use specialized props to keep the wrist joints aligned.



Adjustment: shoulders.

KINEMATICS

This particular asana works best as a preparatory posture to build the necessary strength in the arms, legs, and abdominal muscles for performing arm balances. It also helps develop the necessary range of motion in the shoulders and chest for performing many other poses. And, as with any plank, it is a core strengthener and balancer.



Modification: wrist concerns.

Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
	Forefoot stability	Anterior tibialis, flexor digitorum longus (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle stability	Gastrocnemius, soleus, posterior tibialis, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus (I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
	Ankle dorsiflexion, stability	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Femur adduction, stability	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension, stability	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
	Hip stabilization	Gluteus medius, deep external rotators* (I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	
Shoulder	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
	Flexion of humerus	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid, coracobrachialis, biceps brachii (C, I)	Rhomboids, mid trapezius
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius	
	Scapular abduction, stability	Serratus anterior, subscapularis (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Forearm extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension, stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (I)	

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

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

Chaturanga Dandasana



Four-Limbs Staff Pose

[chuh-tour-RUHN-guh duhn-DAAH-suh-nuh]



Chatur means “four” in Sanskrit, *anga* means “limb” and *danda* means “staff.” In this pose, the four limbs support the straight staff of the spine.

DESCRIPTION

This posture is more challenging than Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana (Plank Pose). Whereas that pose has straight elbows and is similar to the up phase of a push-up, this pose has bent elbows and is similar to the down phase of a push-up, with the body hovering slightly above the ground. It is practiced in the Ashtanga Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskara A and B).

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura chakra) vitalizing energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the metatarsal heads and fingertips in both hands. Anchor the metatarsal heads of both feet. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

BENEFITS

- Strengthens the shoulders, arms, and wrists.
- Strengthens the abdominal muscles and massages the organs.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Wrist concerns—Students with wrist injury or pain or carpal tunnel syndrome should use modifications.

Lower-back weakness—Students who have difficulty holding this pose should practice with modifications.

Pregnancy—This pose should be practiced with modification past the first trimester.

VERBAL CUES

- From Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana, with your palms pressed against the ground and aligned with your shoulders, press back through your heels and prepare to slowly bend your elbows.
- Exhale and slowly lower your body toward the ground. Keep your upper arms close to your rib cage and your shoulders away from your ears. Lower your chest toward the ground and hover a few inches (centimeters) above it; the exact distance will vary from person to person. Go to where you feel you are most comfortably challenged and can still breathe smoothly.
- Squeeze your upper arms in toward your ribs and lengthen your neck so that your ears are farther away from your shoulders. Continue to gaze at a spot between your hands.
- To exit the pose, lower to the ground and prepare to transition into another posture.

ADJUSTMENTS

Elbows—If the student's elbows point away from the body, kneel to one side and place your hands on the person's upper arms near the shoulders. Gently move the arms in toward the rib cage.

Hips—Align the student's body so that the hips are neither too high nor too low in relation to the shoulders and knees. If the hips are too low, straddle the student's back and bend your knees as you hold the sides of the hips and lift slightly. If the student's hips are lifted too high, place your hand lightly on the upper pelvis and instruct the student to move the hips away from your hand.

MODIFICATIONS

Strength building—Instead of allowing the student to struggle to hold the pose, instruct the student to bring the knees to the ground and focus on lowering the chest to the ground slowly and in proper alignment.

Wrist concerns—If the student cannot flex the wrists or put weight on them, instruct the student to flex the elbows and place the forearms on the ground or on blocks.

KINEMATICS

To maintain stability in the shoulders in this pose, the elbows should be placed close to the body. This placement maintains the proper alignment of the humerus (upper arm bone) in the shoulder socket while the joint bears body weight.

Chaturanga Dandasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
	Forefoot stability	Anterior tibialis, flexor digitorum longus (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle stability	Gastrocnemius, soleus, posterior tibialis, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus (I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Leg adduction and stability	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
	Hip stabilization	Gluteus medius, deep hip rotators (I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Shoulder	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
	Humerus extension, stability	Pectoralis major, biceps brachii, anterior deltoid (E, I)	Pectoralis major
	Humerus extension, adduction, and stability	Latissimus dorsi (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular abduction, stability	Subscapularis, serratus anterior (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion and stability	Triceps brachii, posterior deltoid, biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (E, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension, stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (E, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension, stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (I)	

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



Zen Asana

Transitional Pose

[zahn AAH-suh-nuh]

The name *Zen* was chosen for this pose because it is not really a pose; instead, it is usually practiced either as part of, or as a transitional movement during, the Classical Sun Salutation. In a sense, then, it does and yet does not exist; therefore, although a name in Sanskrit might not be found, it is appropriately named Zen Asana. This transitional positioning is both valuable and important, because it places weight on the sternum (breastbone) and helps develop flexibility and coordination in the joints.



DESCRIPTION

Zen Asana is a prone pose in which the toes, knees, hands, chest, and chin touch the ground. The hips and low back are lifted and reach away from the waist, whereas the elbows are flexed and aligned close to the ribs.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the knees and the tops of the feet. Anchor through the chest and evenly in both hands.

BENEFITS

Although seldom practiced outside of the Classical Sun Salutation, this position provides the following benefits:

- Strengthens the sternum.
- Promotes alignment, stability, and flexibility in the spine and shoulders.
- Prepares the body for backbends and other weight-bearing arm poses.
- Creates expansion in the neck and low back.
- Provides a good substitute pose for modifications, as well as a bedrock pose for healthy spinal extension in Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana (Upward-Facing Dog) and Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose), which it often precedes in practice.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Lower-back concerns—Students with lower-back injury or pain should modify or skip this pose.

Wrist or shoulder concerns—Modification should be used by students with shoulder or wrist injury or pain or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Lower-back weakness—Students who have difficulty holding this pose should practice with modifications.

Pregnancy—This pose should be avoided after the first trimester, and with modifications in the second and third trimesters.

VERBAL CUES

- From Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana (Plank Pose), exhale as you bend your knees and bring them to the ground. As your knees near the ground, slowly begin to bend your elbows and bring your chest and chin to the ground as well.

- Keep your elbows drawn in and close to your ribs. Your hips will be lifted, and your sit bones will face the sky.
- Allow your chest to sink into the earth as you roll your collarbones apart. Breathe deeply into your chest. Relax your shoulders away from your ears.
- Press your sit bones up and back as far as you comfortably can, encouraging space in your low back.
- Let the inhalation open space throughout your body, especially in your spine and chest. Allow a deeper release into your body with each exhalation.
- Transition into Bhujangasana (Cobra) or Balasana (Child's Pose).

ADJUSTMENTS

Hips and knees—Some students struggle with the torso positioning in this posture and find themselves basically flat on the ground. The main reason for this discomfort is that they move the chest forward and often lack the arm strength to lower the chest straight down. To adjust, if the knees are not bent and the hips are not raised, straddle or semi-squat above or beside the student, placing your hands to the sides of the pelvis. Instruct the student to bend the knees as you slowly guide the hips to move up and back.

Low back—To support and create space in the student's low back, kneel next to the student and place your hand on the base of the spine. Use your palm—with your fingers pointing toward, yet not touching, the student's tailbone—to gently press the pelvis up and away from the waist.

Chest—Encourage students to rest the sternum on the ground. If a student seems tense in the upper spine, kneel beside the student and place your hand on the mid back. Remind the student to breathe and let the spine sink away from your hand. Take care not to press down on the student's back. With each breath, simply let your hand get a little heavier while the student further relaxes the spine.

Arms and shoulders—If a student's elbows splay and the shoulders are drawn up by the ears, kneel or squat to the side and lightly grasp the upper arms. Gently move the student's arms closer to the ribs. To relax the shoulders from the ears, place your hands on top of the fronts of the student's shoulders and gently draw the shoulders back and away from the ears.

Neck—The adjustment described for arms and shoulders can also create more space in the back of the neck because moving the student's shoulders down, away from the ears, creates an opening across the front of the chest. If the student's arms are in a good position but the neck is cramped or tense, kneel beside the student and use your hands to encourage the shoulders away from the ears. To help the student elongate the neck a little more actively, gently touch the crown of the student's head and instruct the student to push your finger farther up with each inhalation.

MODIFICATIONS

Pregnancy—During the first half of pregnancy, many women feel comfortable lowering themselves into this pose, especially if they have been practicing yoga consistently throughout the pregnancy. If not, it is best to replace Zen Asana with Durga-Go (Cat and Cow Pose). For a woman in her first trimester who feels comfortable, place a pillow or blankets under her abdomen for support. This pose may be a little difficult for postpartum women, especially if they are breastfeeding. If the student does not wish to replace the pose, instruct her to keep a folded blanket or pillow under her chest.

Low-back concerns—If a student is uncomfortable in this posture because the low back feels compromised, replace it with Balasana (Child's Pose) and cue the student to spread the knees wider apart so that the chest and chin sink toward the ground as the student releases the spine.

KINEMATICS

The key is to get into this posture with awareness and control. If students can lower slowly while eccentrically contracting the triceps and actively working the posterior shoulder muscles, then they will settle appropriately into the posture. Cue students to bring the knees to the ground before the body is halfway down in order to avoid having to use the back muscles for support; instruct them to focus on using proper upper-body mechanics. Generally, a student who has good low-back and core structure support in this positioning can more easily perform other variations of plank (such as Chaturanga Dandasana, or Four-Limbs Staff Pose) and backbends (such as Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana, or Upward-Facing Dog).

Zen Asana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe spreading	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, tibialis anterior (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus (C, I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
Thigh	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (E, I)	
	Leg adduction and stability	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip flexion	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (E, I)	Gluteus maximus
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	Rectus abdominis
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Shoulder	Humerus extension, stability	Pectoralis major and minor, biceps brachii, anterior deltoid, serratus anterior (E, I)	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid
	Humerus extension, adduction, and stability	Latissimus dorsi, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Triceps brachii, posterior deltoid (E, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Elbow forearm	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (E, I)	
Hand and fingers	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension, stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (C, R)	

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

Vasishthasana



Side Plank Pose

[vuhs-eesht-AAH-suh-nuh]

Vasishtha is Sanskrit for “most excellent.” It is also the name of a well-known sage associated with good fortune, strength, and dignity. Holding this posture requires strength and increases poise and confidence.

DESCRIPTION

Vasishthasana is a side plank pose most often practiced with the body balanced on the side of one foot and the palm of the hand on the same side. In another variation, the top leg is lifted above the leg on the ground, rather than being stacked on top of it, and the big toe of the lifted leg is grasped by the non-weight-bearing hand.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the metacarpal heads and fingertips of the weight-bearing hand. Anchor through the outer edge of the lower foot.

BENEFITS

- Strengthens the arms, abdomen, and legs.
- Stabilizes the shoulders.
- Stretches and strengthens the wrists.
- Opens the chest.
- Opens the hips if the top leg is lifted.
- Improves concentration and balance.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Wrist concerns—Students with wrist concerns should practice with modifications.

Weakness—This asana should not be practiced by students recovering from serious illness or injury.

Pregnancy—After the first trimester, practice with modifications.

VERBAL CUES

- From Utthita Chaturanga Dandasana (Plank Pose), shift your body weight onto your right hand. Make sure that your shoulder aligns over your wrist and that your fingers point away from your body. Press into your fingertips.
- Rotate the front of your body away from the ground so that your left hip and shoulder are stacked over your right hip and shoulder. Place your left hand on your left hip. Your body weight is supported on your right hand and the outside of your right foot. Feel the energy in your legs.

- Breathe deeply and smoothly.
- Exhale and lift your left arm with your fingers pointing toward the sky. Gaze forward, keeping your ears aligned with your shoulders and your neck long but relaxed. Slightly soften your right elbow to keep it from hyperextending and to stabilize the joint.
- Lengthen your body as much as possible, with the crown of your head moving away from your feet. The more you stretch your feet away from your head, the easier it will be to keep your hips aligned with your knees and shoulders.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit the pose, exhale and rotate your body back into plank; prepare to practice on the opposite side.

ADJUSTMENTS

Legs and hips—The legs should be straight and active in this posture, with the hips lifted and aligned with the knees and shoulders. If the hips sink, then squat or kneel behind the student and press your hand against the outside of the bottom hip to cue lifting of the hips.

Low spine—If a student's low back is significantly arched (that is, constituting swayback), kneel behind the student and gently press your hand or knee into the upper pelvis to encourage length in the low back.

Shoulders—Cue students to align the shoulders comfortably. If the hand is aligned too far forward of the shoulder, the joint will be unstable. If the hand is placed too close to the hips, the wrist joint may be strained. To adjust, kneel behind the student while you place one hand on the lower shoulder and the other hand on the outside of the top hip.



Adjustment: shoulders.



Modification: weakness or wrist concerns; deepening pose (hips).

MODIFICATIONS

Weakness or wrist concerns—The asana may be practiced with the lower elbow and forearm on the ground. This modification allows the student to gradually build strength in the shoulder and torso without putting strain on the wrist.

Low-back weakness or pregnancy—Instruct the student to bend the lower knee and place the lower leg on the ground for support.

Balance difficulty—If a student cannot balance with the top foot stacked on the lower, suggest that the student place the top foot on the ground in front of the opposite foot.

Pose deepening—If students are comfortable in the standard side plank, cue them to lift the top leg while keeping the non-weight-bearing arm perpendicular to the ground. To deepen the hip stretch, cue students to bend the top knee, grasp the big toe with the first two fingers of the upper hand, exhale, and slowly extend the top foot toward the sky. In another modification for a deeper pose, instruct students to anchor through the top foot, stretch the lower leg out in front of the body, and grasp the lifted foot with the top hand.



Modification: deepening the posture.

KINEMATICS

This pose requires a coordinated effort between the strength of the torso and the strength and stability of the weight-bearing shoulder and hip. Students need to build strength in both areas so that they do not drop the hips toward the ground or allow the bottom shoulder to “collapse” into the side of the head.

Vasishthasana (Weight on Right Side)

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, tibialis anterior (C, I)	
Lower leg (R)	Lateral ankle stability	Peroneus longus, brevis, and tertius (C, I)	
Lower leg (L)	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Adduction and stability	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis (R and L)	Hip extension, stability	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis (R)	Hip stability	Gluteus medius, deep external rotators,* tensor fascia lata, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis, right latissimus dorsi (I)	
	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Shoulder	Horizontal humerus extension, external rotation, and stability	Deltoids, infraspinatus, teres minor (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
Lower arm (R)	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Forearm extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension, stability	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris, extensor digitorum, flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
Lower arm (L)	Forearm supination	Supinator (C, I)	
Hand and fingers (R)	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Hand and fingers (L)	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, indicis, and digiti minimi; lumbricales manus; interossei dorsales (C, I)	
	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (C, I)	
Neck (R)	Head rotation to left	Sternocleidomastoid (C, I)	
Neck (L)	Head rotation, neck stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, occipitals, cervical erector spinae, upper trapezius (C, I)	Sternocleidomastoid

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

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, I = isometric contraction, L = left, and R = right.



Purvottanasana

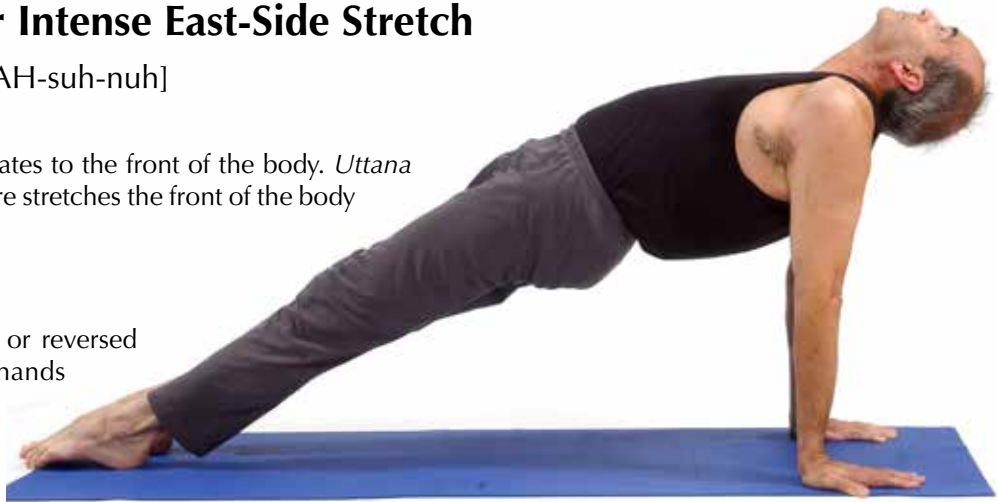
Reverse Plank, or Intense East-Side Stretch

[poohr-VOHT-taahn-AAH-suh-nuh]

Purva means “east” and relates to the front of the body. *Uttana* means “intense.” This posture stretches the front of the body intensely.

DESCRIPTION

Purvottanasana is a supine or reversed plank pose in which the hands press into the ground behind the back as the front of the body is lifted. This asana is practiced as one of the five major exercises in Tibetan yoga.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into the metacarpal heads and fingertips. Anchor into the backs of the heels. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

BENEFITS

- Deeply stretches the chest and shoulders.
- Strengthens the wrists and ankles.
- Builds endurance.
- Provides a counterstretch to Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend, or Intense West-Side Stretch), or seated forward fold.
- Strengthens the posterior muscles in the legs and spine.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Extreme neck weakness—Do not allow students with a neck concern to hyperextend the neck so that the head drops below the shoulders. Instruct them to practice modifications if they experience discomfort.

Shoulder or wrist concerns—Students who have acute pain or injury in the shoulder or wrist should practice with modifications or avoid the pose.

VERBAL CUES

- Begin in Dandasana (Staff Pose) with your palms on the ground beside your hips. Move your hands 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 centimeters) behind your hips and shoulder-width apart. Point your fingers either toward or away from your body, depending on which feels most comfortable to your shoulders and wrists.
- Spread your fingers and press through your arms to expand your chest. Imagine your collarbones moving apart with each inhalation. Breathe deeply, lengthening your spine.

- Exhale and lift your hips and legs off the ground, bringing your body weight onto your arms. Press the soles of your feet into the ground. Feel the length of your body increase with each breath.
- Keep your arms perpendicular to the ground, with a little softness in your elbows to deter hyperextension. If your shoulders and chest are open and the level of your chest is above your shoulders, exhale and slowly relax your neck so that the top of your head points toward the ground behind you. Focus on keeping length in the back of your neck. Allow your throat to stretch gently; however, if you feel discomfort, slowly draw your chin back in toward your chest.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit the posture, exhale and bend your elbows to slowly lower your hips to the ground. Keep your neck relaxed. As your hips touch the ground, slowly roll up your spine from the bottom to the top, moving back into an upright position. Inhale and slowly lift your head upright. Prepare for the next pose.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—If the student's toes are almost touching the ground, gently place your fingers on the top of the foot to help the student ground. Do not press forcefully. However, if the student is susceptible to cramping in the feet or calves, invite her or him to keep the ankles flexed.

Hips—Assist the student in lifting the hips by kneeling to the side and placing your hands on either side of the student's hips. You may also straddle the student's knees and squat slightly as you place your hands on the outside of the student's hips and lift. Another method is to use the same body position, wrap a strap behind the student's pelvis, and lean back to help the student raise the pelvis until it is aligned between the shoulders and knees. With either method, be mindful of your body position.

Shoulders and chest—Remind the student to keep the chest lifted. You can lightly tap the chest while instructing the student to push through the arms and move the chest toward the sky. You may also kneel or squat behind the student, place your hand between the student's shoulder blades, and cue the student to move away from your hand.

Neck—Make certain that the student places the neck in a comfortable position. If the student feels strain caused by the hyperextension, instruct the student to keep the ears aligned with the shoulders and to look straight ahead, or to press the chin into the chest. If the student has difficulty lifting the head, kneel to his or her side with your hand on the back of the head and gently guide the head back into alignment.



Adjustment: hips.

MODIFICATIONS

Weakness or discomfort—Instruct the student to bend the knees, keeping the feet flat on the ground. As the student lifts the hips, the body will be in a tabletop position, which reduces the workload by redistributing the center of mass.

Tight ankles or cramping—Instruct the student to dorsiflex the ankles (draw the toes toward the knees). Doing so helps keep the calves and arches from cramping.

Weak or tight shoulders—Instruct the student to rotate the shoulders externally so that the fingers point away from the body rather than pointing toward the feet. If the student is unable to lift the chest higher than the shoulders, then instruct the student to lower the chin toward the chest. Encourage the student to focus on lifting the chest to eventually touch the chin. See the Kinematics section for the reasons that this modification is important.

KINEMATICS

Students who sag in the shoulders and chest tend to overcompensate for the weakness by hyperextending the neck to such a degree that they “pinch” the neck rather than maintaining length throughout the spine. This overcompensation tends to decrease circulation and expansion in the region, which in turn leads to tension and can injure the vertebrae and supporting structures, rather than increasing the circulation and creating more length and strength.

Purvottanasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe flexion (pressure into ground)	Flexors digitorum and hallucis longus, flexor digitorum brevis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension or hyperextension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus, gluteus medius (C, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
Torso	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	Rectus abdominis
	Hyperextension	Erector spinae, semispinalis (C, I)	
Shoulder	Scapular adduction, stability	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	Anterior deltoid, pectoralis major and minor
	Humerus hyperextension	Latissimus dorsi, teres major (C, I)	
	Hyperextension, stability	Posterior deltoid (I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, ulnaris (I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, indicis, and digiti minimi; lumbricales manus; interossei dorsales (I)	Flexor digitorum profundus and superficialis, flexor digiti minimi, interossei
	Finger abduction	Abductor digiti minimi, abductor pollicis brevis, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (E, I)	Sternocleidomastoid

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

Bhujangasana



Cobra Pose

[bhoo-juhn-GAAH-suh-nuh]

Bhujanga is Sanskrit for “serpent” or “snake.” This pose is often translated in the West as Cobra because the chest is lifted in the same way that a cobra raises its head.

DESCRIPTION

Bhujangasana is a prone backbending posture with numerous variations. In the posture’s simplest form, the chest is lifted off the ground and the arms are at the sides. This posture is part of the Classical Sun Salutation. A deeper variation brings the head and feet together.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into the metacarpal heads and fingertips. Anchor into the front pelvis and upper thighs.

BENEFITS

- Increases range of motion in the spine.
- Strengthens and stretches the spine.
- Opens the chest and shoulders.
- Increases circulation through the lungs and abdomen.
- Energizes the legs.
- Can be used to relieve pain from herniated disks and sciatica.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Pregnancy—Women past the first trimester should use a substitute posture.

Acute back pain or injury—Students with back discomfort or injury should avoid this pose.

Wrist pain or carpal tunnel syndrome—Students with wrist concerns should practice with modification.

VERBAL CUES

- Begin from a prone position, resting your chin or forehead on the ground. Inhale and bring your hands under your shoulders. Relax the tops of your feet and your front thighs against the ground. Point your fingers forward and hug your upper arms into your sides as you exhale. Breathe softly, feeling the connection of your belly with the ground.
- Spread your fingers and as you exhale lightly press into your fingertips as you continue to draw your upper arms towards your rib cage. Inhale, opening space between your shoulder blades and softening your shoulders. Imagine your spine lengthening with each breath.
- Press the front of your pelvis into the ground and activate the muscles in your legs slightly by rolling your front thighs slightly toward each other. Exhale and begin to press the tops of your toes lightly against the ground. Keep the back of the hips (gluteus maximus) relatively relaxed so that the lift in the torso comes primarily from the back muscles.

- Keep your hands rooted into the ground, inhale, and press down and back into your palms to extend your chest forward. Visualize sliding your chest and rib cage forward. Feel your chest lift naturally away from the ground. Keep your neck long and lift through the crown of your head. Anchor your front thighs into the ground and straighten your elbows only to a point where your low back feels comfortable. Keep your hips and thighs on the ground.
- As you inhale, feel your spine and abdomen lengthen; as you exhale, feel your shoulders relax down away from your ears. Be aware of your mid-back muscles helping to lift your chest.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- If it feels best to keep your abdomen on the ground to ease your low back, notice your torso slowly rise as you inhale deeply and lower as you exhale. If you can comfortably lift your abdomen off the ground with no strain in your low back, expand your front torso and chest with each inhalation.
- To exit the position, exhale and slowly lower your abdomen and chest back to the ground from the bottom of your torso to the top. Counter Bhujangasana with Balasana (Child's Pose) or Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog).

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—The top of the feet should be flat against the ground. If the student's toes are curled under, lightly brush the backs of the heels and instruct the student to relax the tops of the feet on the ground.

Legs—The legs should remain active in this position, stretching down away from the hips. To cue the student to activate the muscles, gently tap the backs of the legs.

Hips—If the student's hips are off the ground, lightly touch the low back and remind the student to press the hips toward the ground.

Low back—If a student has trouble lengthening through the back, kneel to the side and place your hand lightly on the upper sacrum. Encourage the student to press the pelvis away from the head.

Elbows—If the student's elbows point away from the body, you can kneel to the side, grasp the upper arms just above the elbows, and gently press the outsides of the arms toward the body.



Adjustment: elbows.

Shoulders—Make sure that the student's shoulders do not lift toward the ears. Kneel to the student's side and lightly place your hands on top of the shoulders. Press down gently to cue the student to create more space between the ears and shoulders and to position the head so that the ears remain aligned with the shoulders.

MODIFICATIONS

Tight back—Ask the student to slide the elbows wider apart than the shoulders and to rest on the forearms for support. Instruct the student to use the arms for support instead of the back muscles and to focus on pressing the chest forward rather than lifting.

Pregnancy—From the second trimester on, pressure on the abdomen is generally uncomfortable and contraindicated. Therefore, instead of Bhujangasana, pregnant women should substitute Durga-Go (Cat and Cow Pose).



Modification: tight back.

KINEMATICS

The McKenzie press-up used in physical therapy is a variation of Bhujangasana. The McKenzie version is a passive spinal arch in which the arms press the spine into a gentle backbend to increase the range of motion. Bhujangasana is a much more active pose, in which the erector spinae muscles help lift the chest and arch the back, thus building strength and increasing the range of motion in the spine.

Bhujangasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum longus, extensor hallucis longus, tibialis anterior (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Leg adduction	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip hyperextension	Hamstrings (C, I)	Iliopsoas, gluteus maximus
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis
	Torso stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Shoulder	Extension and adduction of humerus	Latissimus dorsi, teres major (C, I)	Pectoralis major
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Subscapularis, serratus anterior (C, I)	
	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Triceps brachii, posterior deltoid (E, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	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.



Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana

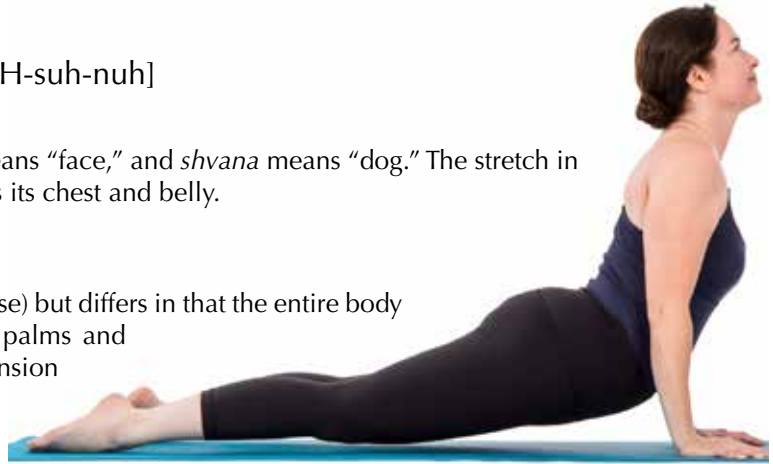
Upward-Facing Dog

[oohr-dhuh-vuh moo-KUHS-vuhn-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *urdhva* means “upward,” *mukha* means “face,” and *shvana* means “dog.” The stretch in this pose resembles the way that a dog stretches its chest and belly.

DESCRIPTION

This posture resembles Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) but differs in that the entire body is lifted off the ground and supported on the palms and the top of the feet. As a result, the spinal extension is deeper in this pose, and more strength is needed to maintain the openness in the chest and shoulders.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Second chakra (Svadhishthana) creative energy, third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into the metacarpal heads and fingertips. Anchor into the tops of the feet. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

BENEFITS

- Strengthens the spine, arms, wrists, legs, and hips.
- Opens the chest.
- Increases circulation to the lungs and abdomen.
- Increases spinal range of motion.
- Improves posture.
- Stretches the abdomen and hip flexors.
- Stimulates the abdominal area.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Pregnancy—Women past the first trimester should use a substitute posture, such as Durga-Go (Cat and Cow Pose).

Low-back pain or injury—Students with this type of condition should use Bhujangasana as a substitute pose.

Wrists—If a student has a history of wrist concerns or complains of wrist pain, use a prop or modify the pose.

VERBAL CUES

- From a prone position, with your chin or forehead resting on the ground—or from Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbs Staff Pose)—stretch your legs away from your hips and chest. Press back through your hands so that they align closer to your waist, spread your fingers, and press into your fingertips.
- Inhale and press the tops of your feet down as you begin to raise your chest and shoulders off the ground. Feel the energy of your arms shift your chest forward.
- Straighten your arms and direct the crown of your head toward the sky. As you continue to extend your elbows, press your pelvis forward, raising your hips and legs off the ground. Feel the strength and energy in your legs moving up through your chest.

- Soften your elbows slightly and keep your upper arms drawn into your sides. With each inhalation, lift your heart toward the sky. Elongate your neck and tilt your chin slightly upward, keeping length in the back of your neck.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- Roll the front of your shoulders open by drawing your shoulder blades slightly closer together. Preserve as much length as possible through your low back and imagine that space expanding in all directions with each breath.
- To exit this position, bend your elbows and slowly lower your body back to the ground; alternatively, move into Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog).

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—Remind the student not to curl the toes under but to flatten the tops of the feet on the ground. Lightly press the bottoms of the heels forward.

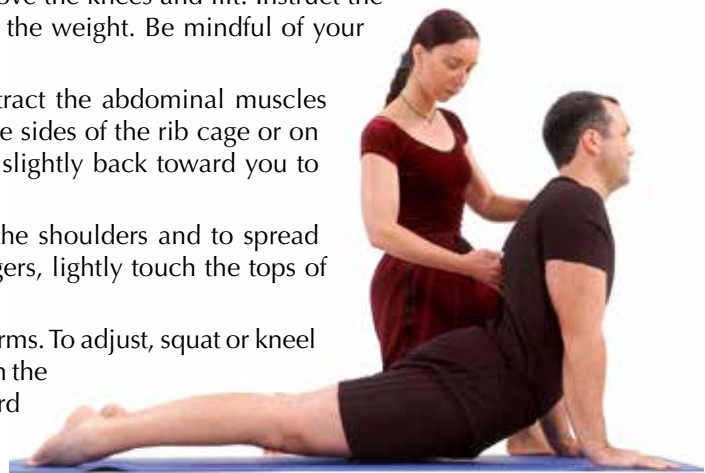
Legs—The legs should remain close together, active, and lifted off the ground. If the student's hips, knees, and shins are touching the ground, straddle the student's legs and squat or kneel above the calves. Place your hands or a strap under the thighs just above the knees and lift. Instruct the student to contract the leg muscles to help support the weight. Be mindful of your own mechanics!

Pelvis—If the belly sags, instruct the student to contract the abdominal muscles while you squat behind and place your hands on the sides of the rib cage or on the outer hips. Guide the torso gently upward and slightly back toward you to help create more space in the low back.

Hands—Remind students to align the hands under the shoulders and to spread the fingers. To encourage students to widen the fingers, lightly touch the tops of the hands.

Chest—The chest should be positioned in front of the arms. To adjust, squat or kneel to one side of the student and place one hand between the shoulder blades. Encourage the student to press forward and up through the chest, away from your hand.

Neck—If the student's shoulders are hunched up toward the ears, cue the student to lower the shoulders and then lengthen the neck and tilt the chin slightly toward the sky. To encourage more length through the back of the neck, stand to the side and place one palm against the base of the student's skull with your fingers pointed toward the spine.



Adjustment: chest.

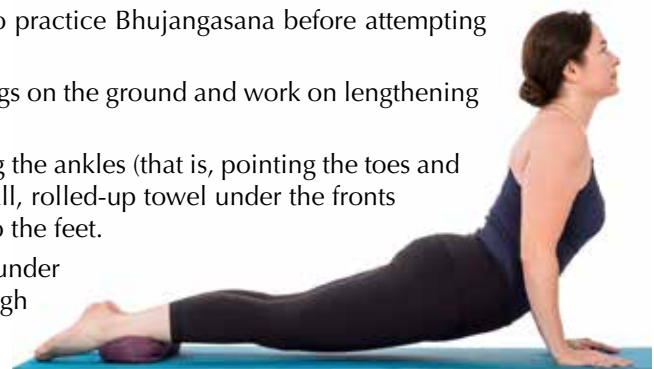
MODIFICATIONS

Extreme weakness—To build strength, instruct students to practice Bhujangasana before attempting this pose.

Strength building—Allow the student to keep the lower legs on the ground and work on lengthening the spine. Cue the student to engage the leg muscles.

Tight ankles—Some students have difficulty plantar-flexing the ankles (that is, pointing the toes and stretching the top ankle). For these students, place a small, rolled-up towel under the fronts of the ankles to provide some relief when anchoring into the feet.

Tight hip flexors or low back—Place blankets or a bolster under the student's thighs. Encourage the student to anchor through the feet by pressing the hips and upper thighs down while lengthening the spine upward.



Modifications: tight ankles.

KINEMATICS

Many students who are new to yoga confuse this posture with Bhujangasana. As a result, they extend the arms fully but keep the legs and hips on the ground—a position that generally creates too much hyperextension in the lumbar spine. Suggest that these students come down to Bhujangasana and work on gradually lengthening the spine.

Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toes in extension against ground	Extensor digitorum longus and hallucis, anterior tibialis, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, posterior tibialis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle in plantar flexion but actively dorsiflexing	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus, peroneals (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip extension and hyperextension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus, rectus femoris (C, I)	Iliopsoas (I)
	Hip stability	Deep external rotators,* adductors (C, I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	Rectus abdominis, obliques
	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Flexion of humerus, stability	Pectoralis major, coracobrachialis, biceps brachii (C, I)	
	Arm stability	Latissimus dorsi, teres major (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Elbow extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
	Wrist stability	Flexor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis (C, I)	
	Finger abduction	Abductor pollicis longus, opponens pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Slight neck hyperextension and stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (I)	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes

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

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

Shalabhasana



Locust Pose

[shuh-luhb-HAAH-suh-nuh]

Shalabha is Sanskrit for “locust” or “grasshopper.”

This posture is said to resemble a locust as it rests on the ground with the legs higher than the front of the body.



DESCRIPTION

In Shalabhasana, the body is prone and the legs are lifted off the ground. The posture has two main variations, both of which strengthen the back of the body.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Second chakra (Svadhithana) creative energy, third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the front of the pelvis. Anchor into the upper abdomen.

BENEFITS

- Strengthens the low spine and the posterior hip and thigh muscles.
- Stretches the abdominal cavity.
- Stimulates the kidneys.
- Opens the shoulders and chest.
- Stimulates circulation in the abdomen and chest.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Pregnancy—Because the belly is on the ground, this posture should not be practiced after the first trimester of pregnancy.

Low-back pain or injury—Students with this type of condition should either practice this pose one leg at a time or avoid the pose.

VERBAL CUES

- From a prone position with your chin or forehead resting on the ground, reach your feet toward the wall behind you. Rest your arms at your sides with your palms facing down.
- Inhale and imagine the crown of your head and your toes moving farther away from each other as you lengthen your sides. Reach your hands back toward your feet and feel a lengthening in the sides of your neck and your upper shoulders.
- Inhale and raise your head, chest, knees, and feet slightly off the ground. Imagine the length of your body increasing as you inhale: feet and head moving even farther apart. Your abdomen and front pelvis remain rooted on the ground.
- As you continue to breathe, press your chest forward and stretch your feet away from your body. Spread your toes to more fully energize your legs. Feel your front body lift and lengthen slowly as you breathe in deeply. If it is comfortable to do so, lift your legs slightly higher while keeping length in your low spine.
- Continue to focus on your breathing.

- As you breathe, feel the muscles throughout the back half of your body working to maintain the lift in your legs and torso. Keep your ears aligned with your shoulders and expand through your chest.
- To exit the position, exhale and slowly lower your chest, head, and legs back to the ground. Bend your knees and slightly rock your feet from side to side to relax your low back. Counter with Balasana (Child's Pose) or Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog).

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—If the student does not actively engage the feet, tap the balls of the feet to cue the student to stretch out and spread through the ends of the toes.

Legs—The knees should be extended and the hips slightly hyperextended. Remind the student to contract the muscles of the hips and legs and stretch the feet away from the hips. Kneel behind the student's feet, placing your hands under the ankles, and slightly lift the legs as you draw the toes toward you.

Shoulders—Kneel beside the student, and place your hands on the upper arms near the shoulders. Rotate the student's shoulders externally (toward the spine), and remind the student to lengthen the spine.

MODIFICATIONS

Strength building—Instruct students to practice Ardha Shalabhasana (Half-Locust). The chin remains on the ground, and the legs are lifted one at a time.

Deeper variation—Cue students to start in a prone position while keeping the chin on the ground. Instruct them to place the hands and forearms under the fronts of the hips and thighs for support. As they inhale, instruct them to lift one or both legs into the air as high as is comfortably challenging.



Modification: deeper variation.

KINEMATICS

The degree of hyperextension in the hips and spine is dependent on the strength of the student's spinal and hip extensor muscles, as well as the flexibility of the oppositional abdominal and hip flexor muscles. It is important to cue students to maintain length in the lower back.

Shalabhasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe flexion	Flexor digitorum longus and brevis, flexor hallucis longus (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Slight thigh adduction	Tensor fascia lata (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip hyperextension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis, obliques
	Rib and chest elevation	Pectoralis minor (C, I)	
	Torso stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Shoulder	Arm hyperextension	Latissimus dorsi, posterior deltoid, triceps brachii	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm supination	Supinator (C, I)	
	Arm extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist extension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, indicis, and digiti minimi; lumbricales manus; interossei dorsales (C, I)	
	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension and stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (I)	

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



Dhanurasana

Bow Pose

[dhuh-noor-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *dhanu* means “bow,” as in a bow and arrow. In this pose, the torso represents the bow, and the arms signify the action of the bowstring by pulling the head and feet closer together.

DESCRIPTION

Dhanurasana is a moderate to deep backbend. The knees are bent, and the arms reach back toward the lifted feet.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the front of the pelvis and abdomen. Anchor through the fronts of the shins, where the hands grasp the ankles.

BENEFITS

- Stretches the entire front of the body.
- Strengthens the spine.
- Opens the shoulders, chest, and throat.
- Stimulates circulation in the abdomen and anterior of the pelvis.
- Strengthens the lungs.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Pregnancy—This pose is not recommended for women after the first trimester.

Acute low-back injury, high blood pressure, or heart concerns—Students with any of these health concerns are not advised to practice this pose.

Shoulder concerns—Students with shoulder injury or pain should practice with modifications.

VERBAL CUES

- From a prone position, with the chin or forehead resting on the ground, position your legs so that your knees are slightly wider apart than your hips. Exhale and bend your knees so that your lower legs are perpendicular to the ground.
- Inhale and reach your hands back toward your feet while slowly lifting your chest off the ground. Dorsiflex your ankles (point your toes toward your knees) and wrap your hands around the outsides of your ankles or the tops of your feet. Anchor the front of your pelvis into the ground and lift your chest forward and upward to lengthen your abdomen. By pressing your chest slightly forward, you open space in your low back as well.
- Inhale and draw your shoulder blades toward each other to open the front of your shoulders and chest.
- Spread your toes to energize your feet and legs. As you exhale, press your feet away from your body. As you do this, you will feel your chest lift and open more fully.

- Continue to focus on breathing smoothly.
- On your next exhalation, if it feels comfortable to you, lift the fronts of your thighs off the ground as you reach the soles of your feet toward the sky. Maintain the lift and openness in your chest and shoulders.
- With each inhalation, lift the crown of your head, pressing your chest forward and lengthening your low back.
- Feel your breath as your abdomen expands and contracts against the ground.
- To exit the position, exhale, release your hands gently from your feet, and lower your knees and chest back to the ground. Slightly rock your legs from side to side to relax your low back. Balasana (Child's Pose) is a good counterstretch.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—If the student's toes are not pointed down toward the knees, lightly tap the feet to cue the student to activate them more.

Knees—The knees should be slightly farther than hip-width apart. If the student's knees are too close together, kneel or squat to the side and lightly place your hands on the insides of the knees. Apply enough pressure to cue the student to widen the legs. Also, the knees should not be flexed more than 90 degrees. If they are, generally the elbows are flexed as well. Lightly touch the backs of the student's heels and cue the student to extend the knees slightly so that the arms straighten. This adjustment keeps the chest open.

Shoulders—If a student has difficulty lifting through the front of the chest, kneel to the side with your hands on the fronts of the shoulders and rotate the shoulders externally (toward the spine) as you gently lift the student's upper torso.

MODIFICATIONS

Strength and flexibility building—Instruct students to first practice Ardha Dhanurasana (Half-Bow Pose) by lifting one leg at a time while keeping the torso on the ground. This modification helps build strength and flexibility gradually in the legs and low spine. As students build strength over time, they can begin lifting both legs at the same time, then move on to lifting the torso as well.

Tight shoulders—If the student cannot reach back to the feet comfortably, place one end of a strap in each hand and wrap it around the fronts of the ankles.

Deepening of the shoulder stretch—Instruct students that instead of placing the palms around the outside of the ankles or feet, they can place the palms against the arches of the feet and align the thumbs with the big toes. This position actively increases the external rotation of the shoulders.



Modification: strength building.



Modification: deepening the shoulder stretch.

KINEMATICS

Because the full body weight is borne by the abdominal cavity in Dhanurasana, individuals who are new to practicing the posture may find that the heart rate increases due to the pressure exerted on deep blood vessels such as the vena cava. If this effect causes discomfort, suggest that the affected student exit the pose and practice lying on her or his side.

Students who can easily grasp the ankles can lift the thighs off the ground more effectively by contracting the quadriceps concentrically, as if straightening the legs, than by using a solely concentric contraction of the hip extensors. The two sets of opposing muscles work together to create the bow position that gives the posture its name. In addition, the wider positioning of the feet in relation to the hips helps the student avoid placing undue stress and strain on the sacrum.

Dhanurasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum longus, extensor hallucis longus, tibialis anterior (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus (C, I)
Thigh	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (C, I)	Quadriceps
Hip and pelvis	Initial hip hyperextension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
	Active hip hyperextension	Quadriceps, hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis
	Rib and chest elevation	Pectoralis minor (C, I)	
	Torso stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
Shoulder	Humerus hyperextension	Latissimus dorsi, posterior deltoid, triceps brachii (C, I)	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Elbow extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Wrist extension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (I)	
	Finger flexion	Flexor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis, dorsal interossei (I)	
	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis, upper trapezius (C, I)	

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

Setu Bandhasana



Bridge Pose

[sey-TOO buhn-DHAAH-suh-nuh]

Setu is a Sanskrit term for “bridge” or “dam,” and *bandha* means “lock.” The shape of the body in this pose resembles a bridge.

DESCRIPTION

Setu Bandhasana is a relatively easy backbending asana in which the head, the neck, and the top edge of the shoulders remain on the ground, while the knees are flexed and the feet are flat on the ground. The resulting body shape resembles a bridge, and because the neck and chin press together (*jalandhara bandha*), energy is held in, much like water controlled by a dam.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root evenly into both heels. Anchor into the shoulder blades and the backs of the arms.

BENEFITS

- Opens and expands the chest.
- Strengthens the mid and upper spine.
- Helps alleviate symptoms of mild depression.
- Stretches the entire torso.
- Increases circulation to the thyroid gland.
- Energizes the legs.
- Relieves low-back tightness.
- Helps alleviate menstrual and menopausal discomfort.

⚠ CAUTION

Neck pillows—The use of neck pillows should be avoided in this posture, as they do not allow for the proper range of motion in the back of the neck.

Neck concerns—Students with acute neck pain or injury should avoid this pose.

Pregnancy—This pose should not be practiced after the second trimester.

VERBAL CUES

- From a supine position, bend your knees and bring your heels toward your hips. Place your feet hip-width apart and parallel with each other. Bring your arms to your sides and slightly reach your hands toward your heels. Rest your shoulder blades comfortably against the ground.
- Slightly tilt your lower pelvis so that your sit bones point toward the backs of your knees. Lengthen your low back slightly. Anchor your shoulder blades into the ground, and lengthen the back of your neck. Without moving your legs, feel your inner thigh muscles activate as if they were pressing together.

- Inhale to energize your body. Exhale and slowly peel your pelvis and lower spine off the ground. Feel your vertebrae lift, one by one, off the ground as the lifting action moves up toward your neck.
- Press the fronts of your hips and your abdomen toward the sky. Imagine your tailbone reaching to touch the back of your knees. Feel your chest draw in toward your chin.
- As you exhale, press your kneecaps forward, away from your body, and notice a lengthening in your front thighs. As your chest moves closer to your chin, breathe into the stretch in your abdomen and in the back of your neck.
- If possible, interlace your fingers under your back. Squeeze your elbows and shoulder blades together, lifting your chest even higher.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- With each inhalation, feel your chest and ribs open more fully. On each exhalation, press your feet more firmly against the ground.
- To exit the position, unclasp your fingers and bring your arms back to your sides. Exhale and slowly lower your spine back to the ground, one vertebra at a time, from the top to the bottom. Rest your spine against the ground and allow all of your muscles to relax. Lift your knees into your chest and rock gently from side to side.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—The feet should be hip-width apart and parallel to each other. If the toes turn in or out, gently tap the outsides of the student's feet to cue the student to realign the feet.

Knees—If the student rolls the legs out laterally from the body, kneel in front of the knees and place your hands on the outsides of the student's lower thighs. Lightly move the knees closer to parallel.

Hips and low back—If the hips are not lifted higher than the chest and knees, place a strap around the student's pelvis at the sacral level. Stand in a slight lunge facing the student's knees and place your front foot between the student's feet. As you hold onto the ends of the strap, lean back slightly while straightening your front leg and gently lift the student's hips toward you. Move slowly and check in with the student regarding comfort.

Chest—If the chest sinks between the shoulders, place a strap around the student's upper torso under the scapulae. Hold the ends of the strap in your hands and sit or semi-squat a few inches (centimeters) away from the student's head. Lean back and lift the student's chest and rib cage toward you.



Adjustment: chest.

MODIFICATIONS

Early pregnancy or weakness—Place folded blankets under the student's low back and hips. You also can place a block under the sacrum for the student to rest on. These modifications allow the abdomen and chest to stretch without the effort.

Low-back discomfort—If the student has slight tightness in the lumbar area, instruct the student to lift the heels off the ground in order to relieve some of the muscular activity in the back. Also, remind students to press the inner thighs toward each other so that the legs do not splay outward.

Pose deepening—Instruct the student to draw the heels closer to the hips and grasp the ankles. This modification increases the stretch through the thighs and allows for a greater arch throughout the length of the spine.

Deeper supported positioning—In this variation, place a block under the student's upper pelvis (the block must not rest on the lumbar spine) as in the pregnancy modification. Instruct the student to extend one leg, keeping the heel on



Modification: deeper supported positioning.

the ground. Invite the student to relax the leg and, if the student is comfortable in the lower back, to extend the other leg. If discomfort is felt, ask the student to slowly bend the knees again and rest. If the student feels comfortable with the legs extended, the student may stretch the arms overhead and relax in this position. The low back should remain comfortable.

KINEMATICS

Because the neck remains on the ground in this posture, it can be used as a preliminary step in building the necessary range of motion in the neck and shoulders for Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand). In the deeper supported variation of Setu Bandhasana, the lifting of the pelvis allows for a deeper passive psoas stretch. Remind students not to turn the head once the pelvis is lifted so as not to place strain on the neck.

Setu Bandhasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (I)	
	Toe flexion (pressure into ground)	Flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, flexor digitorum brevis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle dorsiflexion, stability	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (I)	
Thigh	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (C, I)	Quadriceps
	Slight adduction	Adductors (I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip hyperextension	Gluteus maximus, hamstrings (C, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis
	Rib and chest elevation	Pectoralis minor (C, I)	
	Torso stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	
Shoulder	Humerus hyperextension	Latissimus dorsi, teres major, posterior deltoid, triceps brachii (C, I)	Pectoralis major and minor, anterior deltoid, serratus anterior
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction and depression	Rhomboids, mid and lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
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.



Urdhva Dhanurasana

Upward Bow Pose

[oohr-dhuh-vuh dhuh-noor-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *urdhva* means “upward” or “backward,” and *dhanu* means “bow” (like a bow and arrow). Thus the name signifies an upward bow, and the posture is sometimes called *Urdhva Mukha Dhanurasana* (Upward-Facing Bow). Another much-used name for this position is *Chakrasana* [chuk-RAAH-suh-nuh]. *Chakra* means “wheel” and, as discussed in chapter 5, is the name for the body’s energy centers. The shape of the body in Urdhva Dhanurasana can be said to resemble the drawn string of a bow or the roundness of a wheel; generally, however, *Chakrasana* indicates a backward somersault, which is used in some vinyasa flow practices.



DESCRIPTION

Urdhva Dhanurasana is a full backbend in which the hands and feet support the body and the abdomen faces toward the sky. The pose may also be classified as an inversion.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy, fifth chakra (Vishuddha) purifying energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the heels and metatarsal heads of both feet. Anchor into the metacarpal heads and fingertips of both hands. Balance the grounding energy evenly between the hands and feet.

BENEFITS

- Increases flexibility and range of motion in the spine.
- Strengthens the shoulders, arms, wrists, legs, and spine.
- Opens the chest and shoulder girdle.
- Relieves asthma symptoms by expanding the lungs.
- Increases energy.
- Stimulates the thyroid gland.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Shoulder or wrist concerns—Students with any of these concerns should practice with modifications or avoid this pose.

Glaucoma or high blood pressure—Students with either of these conditions are advised against practicing this pose.

Low-back injury—Students with this condition should avoid this pose.

VERBAL CUES

- From a supine position, bend your knees and bring your heels as close to your hips as is comfortable. Bend your elbows and lift your upper arms off the ground. Place your palms flat on the ground near the top of your shoulders with your fingers pointing toward your body. Exhale and gently hug your elbows toward each other so that your arms are parallel to each other.
- Spread your fingers and press into your fingertips. Slightly rotate your thighs internally and feel the strength and grounding in your legs.
- Exhale and begin to press your feet and hands firmly against the ground.
- As in Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose), press firmly into the heels and lift the hips and back off the ground. Continue to hug the inner thighs toward each other and the elbows toward each other.
- Inhale to open your chest and lengthen your low back. As you exhale again, slowly straighten your arms while lifting your head and upper torso off the ground. Maintain the alignment in your elbows, drawing them in closer toward the midline of your body.
- Continue to press strongly, yet without strain, through your arms and heels. Lift your lower abdomen toward the sky. Feel as if your spinal and posterior hip muscles are gently lifting your spine upward away from the ground.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- Feel your spine lengthen and maintain equal balance between your feet and hands.
- To exit the posture, exhale and slowly bend your knees and elbows, lowering your shoulders and hips back to the ground. Inhale and exhale deeply to relax your spine. Let your knees rock gently from side to side, massaging your lower back.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—Make certain that the student's feet are hip-width apart and parallel to each other. If the toes point out, squat in front of the student and gently nudge the feet into alignment so that the toes point forward. Remind the student to keep the feet active and press through the heels.

Knees—The knees should remain somewhat flexed. If the student's knees point laterally from the body, lightly place your hands on the outer thighs and move the student's legs closer to parallel. Continue to cue the student to press inward with the inner thighs.

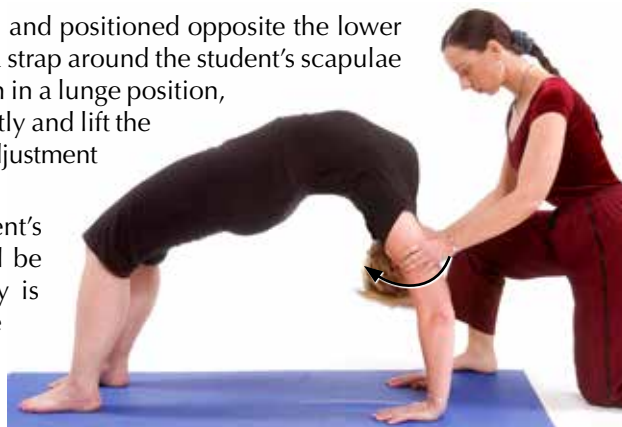
Hips and low back—If the hips are not lifted, place a strap around the student's hips at the sacral level. Stand facing the student's knees in a slight lunge with your front foot between the student's feet. As you hold onto the ends of the strap, lean back, straightening your front leg, and gently lift the student's hips toward you.



Adjustment: hips and low back.

Mid and upper spine and chest—The chest should be lifted and positioned opposite the lower legs. If the chest sinks down between the shoulders, place a strap around the student's scapulae (shoulder blades). Stand facing the student's head and begin in a lunge position, holding the ends of the strap in your hands. Lean back slightly and lift the student's chest and rib cage forward. Use caution with this adjustment so as not to take the student off balance.

Shoulders—Use extreme caution when adjusting a student's shoulders in Urdhva Dhanurasana! The shoulders should be rotated externally. However, because the student's body is upside down and facing away from you, confusion can arise about the direction in which you should attempt to roll the upper arms. Face the student's head and place your hands on the upper arms, near the shoulders, with your thumbs closest to the head. Rotate the student's arms so that your thumbs move toward you and the student's



Adjustment: shoulders. Slowly rotate the arms in the direction of the arrow.

elbows move toward the student's body. Moving the arms in the opposite direction can injure the student's shoulders. If you have any doubts about making this adjustment, do not do it!

Neck—Do not touch the student's neck in this posture. Verbally cue the student to relax the neck and to keep length between the ears and shoulders.

MODIFICATIONS

Arm weakness or tightness—Position the student in Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose) with the pelvis on a block. Instruct the student to place the hands in position for Urdhva Dhanurasana and press into the hands while maintaining elbow alignment. To focus more energy into pressing through the arms, a strap can be placed around the upper arms, just above the elbows, to keep the arms together.

Weak or tight wrists—Place two blocks diagonally against a wall; be sure to place the blocks on a mat so that they do not slide. Instruct the student to start in Setu Bandhasana, with the head facing the blocks and the hands on the front of the blocks with the fingers facing down. On an inhalation, the student straightens the arms as much as is comfortable. With this modification, the angle of the wrist is much more forgiving for those who have with weakness and tightness in the joint. If the elbows rotate outward, a strap can be wrapped around the upper arms above the elbows.

Limited spinal range of motion and significant weakness—Have the student lie with the back over an exercise ball or a blanketed chair with the feet and hands touching the ground. This prop supports the spine and lengthens the torso. (See chapter 11 Restorative Postures.)

Posture deepening—A student can deepen the posture by entering the asana from a standing position. To build confidence, position the student with his or her back to a wall that is about as far away as the student's hands and feet are from each other in the full expression of this pose. Instruct the student to reach the hands overhead and behind and “walk” the hands down the wall toward the ground. Make certain that the toes point directly forward and the thighs rotate inward slightly as they lower the upper body down toward the ground. Moving into the pose from a standing position also builds strength in the abdominal muscles.

KINEMATICS

The closer the hands are to the feet, the more challenging the posture is. To remain comfortable in this pose, the student needs a certain range of motion through the torso. One also needs external rotation in the shoulder joint in order to retain joint stability. As in all backbending poses, if the thighs rotate slightly internally then the lower spine and sacrum are not compressed.

Urdhva Dhanurasana (Lifting Up From a Supine Position)

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (I)	
	Toe flexion (pressure into ground)	Flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, flexor digitorum brevis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion, stability	Gastrocnemius, soleus, anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (I)	
Thigh	Knee flexion	Hamstrings, stability (C, I)	Quadriceps
	Thigh adduction, stability	Adductors (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip hyperextension	Gluteus maximus, hamstrings (C, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, rectus abdominis (C, I)	
	Torso stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (I)	Rectus abdominis
	Sternoclavicular stability	Subclavius (I)	
Shoulder	Humerus hyperflexion, stability	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoid (I)	Latissimus dorsi, pectoralis major and minor
	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Serratus anterior, subscapularis (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids and mid trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension, stability	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Forearm extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, 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 hyperextension	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (E)	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes

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



Eka Pada Rajakapotasana

One-Legged Royal Pigeon Pose

[eka-PAAH-duh-RAAH-juh kuh-poht-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *eka pada* means “one leg,” *raja* means “royal,” and *kapota* means “pigeon” or “dove.” This pose name reflects the fact that the practitioner’s chest puffs out like that of a roosting pigeon.

DESCRIPTION

Eka Pada Rajakapotasana is addressed here in the form of two variations and one modified alternative. The version practiced most commonly is referred to as Baby Pigeon, which is more of a prone posture that comes after a deep lunge. The outside of the front leg is placed with the knee flexed and resting against the ground, and the trailing leg is extended straight back with the front of the leg on the ground. The torso is folded forward over the bent knee.



The second variation begins in the same position as Baby Pigeon; however, instead of folding forward over the front leg, the practitioner keeps the torso upright and arches back slightly while the head and hands reach toward the back foot. This variation is generally called Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged Royal Pigeon).

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Second chakra (Svadhithana) creative energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root through the sit bone and the outer edge of the flexed leg. Anchor into the front thigh of the back leg. Balance the grounding energy evenly in both legs.

BENEFITS

- Opens the hips and chest.
- Lengthens the hip flexors and external rotators.
- Stabilizes the hips.
- Stimulates and stretches the abdominal organs.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Knee or hip injury—Students with an acute knee or hip concern should avoid this posture.

Sacroiliac concerns—Students with sacroiliac injury or instability should proceed with modifications or avoid this pose.

VERBAL CUES

Variation 1: Baby Pigeon

- Starting with your weight on your hands and knees, inhale and lengthen your spine. Imagine moving the crown of your head and your sit bones as far from each other as possible.
- Exhale and step your right foot forward, coming into a low lunge with your hands on the ground. Slide your right foot across to the outside of your left hand, then slowly lower your right knee to the outside of your right hand. If you feel discomfort in your hip or knee as you lower your leg, practice the rest of the pose with modifications.
- Slide your left leg behind you and lower your pelvis toward the ground. Feel the front of your left thigh elongate. Breathe softly into that space. Press into your hands and lift your lower rib cage away from your hips as you open space in your low back.
- Inhale and stretch your chest and head toward the sky. Roll the fronts of your shoulders open to expand your chest. As you breathe, imagine your collar bones drawing apart with each inhalation.
- Exhale and begin to slowly walk your hands forward away from your body, lowering your torso toward the ground. Your hands should be shoulder-width apart, and if it is comfortable to do so your right knee should be positioned to the outside of your right shoulder. This positioning helps release your hips without straining your knee joint. Again, if this positioning is not comfortable, practice with modifications.
- Continue stretching your upper body forward, breathing deeply to relax your hip and spinal muscles.
- Take another five or six breaths as you continue to soften your upper body and hips.
- To exit this position, press your hands into the ground and slowly walk your hands back toward your body as you raise your torso. When your hands are under your shoulders, press down and lift your hips off the ground and move back onto your hands and knees; alternatively, stretch out your legs in Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) before preparing for the opposite side.



Variation 2: Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged Royal Pigeon Pose)

- From Baby Pigeon, with your torso perpendicular to the ground, focus on lengthening your spine and lifting your rib cage away from your hips.
- Exhale and bend your left knee, bringing your left foot toward the back of your pelvis. Your pelvis will likely rise off the ground. Breathe and picture your hips rooting into the ground.
- Exhale and reach your arms overhead and grasp your left foot or ankle with both hands. Breathe slowly and smoothly.
- Inhale deeply and “puff” your chest up and out like that of a pigeon to lift your rib cage even more. Rotate the fronts of your shoulders out from your chest. Slightly tilt your chin upward and arch back from your mid spine as much as you feel comfortable doing. Exhale and draw your elbows closer together.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- Maintain the length in your low back as you continue to lift your chest. Imagine setting the back of your head into the arches of your feet. Feel the smooth arc of your spine.
- To exit this position, slowly release your left foot. Maintain control of your left leg so that the foot does not drop quickly to the ground. Bring your hands back to the ground under your shoulders and press down to lift your hips off the ground and move back onto your hands and knees; alternatively, stretch out your legs in Adho Mukha Shvanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) before preparing for the opposite side.



ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—The top of the foot on the extended leg should be relaxed and resting on the ground. The leg should be aligned with the hip. If the leg is abducted, squat or kneel to the side of the student and guide the leg inward by gently pressing the outer hip inward. Lightly tap the foot to encourage relaxation.

Knees and hips—The extended knee should be square to the ground and not rotating outward. Generally, if the knee rotates externally, it does so because the opposite hip is tight (see the modifications section for this pose) and the body leans to that side. To guide the student into alignment, place your hands on the outsides of the hips while kneeling behind the student. This adjustment usually also realigns the extended knee. If the student is able to keep the hips grounded but feels discomfort in the kneecap of that leg, place a folded towel or cushion under the knee for comfort.

Lumbar spine—If the student slumps into the lower back, cue the student to lift the rib cage. Kneel beside the student, place your hands on the outsides of the rib cage, and lift gently to encourage length in the back.

Shoulders—Remind the student to maintain soft shoulders and keep space in the neck below the ears. Place your hands gently on the fronts of the shoulders to cue relaxation and expansion in the chest and neck.



MODIFICATIONS

Tight hips—Place a rolled blanket or a block under the hip of the bent leg to bring the top of the pelvis level. Modification: tight hips.

Strength and flexibility building—Place blocks under the hands and to the sides of the student's hips to help support the upper body as the student strengthens the torso and stretches the hips.

Intermediate variation—Some students are flexible enough in the hip flexors but unable to reach the arms over the head to clasp the back foot. Offer these students the following variation. Bring them to the point where they bend the back leg. Instruct them to exhale and reach both hands back to grasp the ankle as they open the chest. If students feel comfortable, instruct them to exhale and rotate the torso slightly to the extended-leg side as they reach the same-side arm back to clasp the foot. If they have enough balance and strength, invite them to raise the opposite arm overhead and slightly raise the chest, breathing deeply and smoothly.



Modification: intermediate variation.

Deepening of the pose (Twisted Pigeon)—Cue students as follows: “From Baby Pigeon, with your right leg flexed, cross your left elbow toward the outside of your right thigh. Bend your elbows, press your palms together in front of your chest, and rotate your torso to the right. Your hips should maintain contact with the ground during the twist.” This pose can be called Parivrtta Eka Pada Rajakapotasana. To adjust, kneel behind the student with one hand on the closest shoulder and your other hand on the back of the student's rib cage. Gently guide the shoulder toward you and press the rib cage away.



Modification: deepening into Parivrtta Eka Pada Rajakapotasana.

KINEMATICS

Many people have overly tight external hip rotators and therefore find it difficult to sit comfortably in Eka Pada Rajakapotasana. The asana can be modified with a bolster or folded blankets placed under the flexed hip; otherwise, the student risks injuring the knee. The risk is even greater if the student places the weight of the upper body on the flexed thigh.

The following table illustrates the kinematics of the full expression of the pose. Due to the extreme hyperextension in the spine in the deepest expression of the pose, it should be modified for students whose hips are even moderately tight. If the outer hip on the bent leg and the front thigh of the back leg do not rest comfortably on the ground, then the tightness in the hips and extreme hyperextension in the spine may lead to instability or injury over time.

Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (Right Knee Bent)

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
Lower leg (R)	Ankle dorsiflexion, inversion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus (C, I)	
Lower leg (L)	Ankle plantar flexion, stability	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus, peroneals (C, I)	
Thigh (R)	Knee flexion	Hamstrings, sartorius (C, I)	
Thigh (L)	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis (R)	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas (C, I)	Adductors, gracilis
	Femoral abduction	Gluteus medius and minimus (C, I)	
	Initial femoral external rotation	Adductors, sartorius (E, R)	
	Femur external rotation	Deep external rotators* (I, R)	
Hip and pelvis (L)	Hip hyperextension	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	Iliopsoas, quadriceps
Torso	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	Rectus abdominis
	Rib and chest elevation	Pectoralis minor (C, I)	
	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (E, I)	
Shoulder	Humerus flexion	Pectoralis major, anterior deltoids (C, I)	
	Stability and external rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Scapular stability	Subscapularis, serratus anterior (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Supporting posture in mid back, downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (C, I)	Triceps brachii
Lower arm	Wrist flexion	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger flexion	Flexor digitorum profundus and superficialis, flexor pollicis longus (C, I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (E)	

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

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, I = isometric contraction, L = left, and R = right (in body segment column) or relaxed (in muscles active column).



Ushtrasana

Camel Pose

[oosh-TRAAH-suh-nuh]

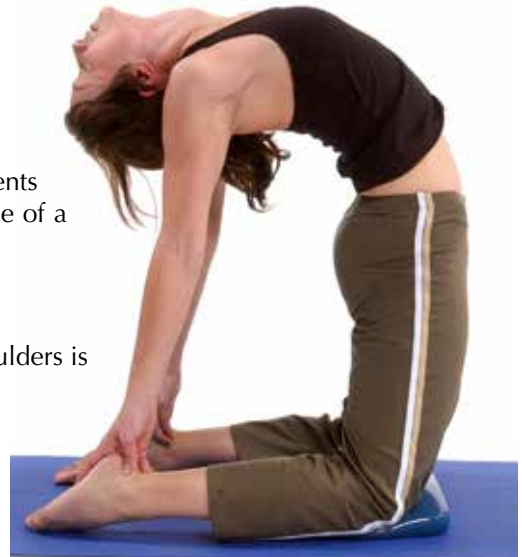
Ushtra is Sanskrit for “camel.” In this pose, the arch of the body represents the hump of a camel’s back, and the bend in the legs resembles those of a camel’s rising from the ground.

DESCRIPTION

Ushtrasana is a kneeling backbend. The openness in the hips and shoulders is a good precursor to more demanding backbends.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

Third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy



FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the tops of the feet and the shins. Anchor the hands onto the backs of the heels or onto a prop.

BENEFITS

- Opens the shoulders and chest.
- Strengthens the mid-back and posterior shoulder muscles.
- Stretches the abdominal cavity.
- Increases circulation to the throat area.
- Lengthens the hip flexors.
- Stretches the fronts of the ankles.
- Increases awareness of alignment.

⚠ CAUTIONS

Back or neck concerns—Students with back or neck difficulty should practice with modification.

High blood pressure—Students with this condition are advised to use modification.

VERBAL CUES

- Starting in a kneeling position, align your knees hip-width apart. Curl your toes under so that your heels are lifted. Slightly rotate your thighs inward to stabilize your hips.
- Reach behind you and place the heel of your hands on the top of your pelvis. Exhale and draw your elbows and shoulder blades closer together. Feel your chest expand. Press your hands against the top of your pelvis to move your hips slightly forward. Your thighs should remain mostly perpendicular to the ground.
- Inhale and lift your ribs and chest as you press your pelvis forward a little more. Imagine that a hand placed between your shoulder blades is gently pressing in and up to lift your chest.
- Reach your right hand down toward your right heel and rest your palm there. Take a breath, then slowly reach your left hand to your left heel. Your thumbs should point away from your body. Breathe in deeply and rotate the fronts of your shoulders away from your chest.

- Continue to focus on your breath.
- Press your hands into your heels as you draw your elbows slightly closer together. With your next inhalation, relax your neck, allowing your head to tilt back slightly into a comfortable position. Continue to maintain length in the sides and back of your neck. If your neck feels compromised or uncomfortable, softly draw your chin in toward your chest.
- If you are comfortable in this position, lower the tops of your feet against the ground. Continue to open your heart toward the sky. Feel the front of your chest expand, opening up your heart energy.
- On each inhalation, feel your chest and lower back rise. On each exhalation, feel your thighs rotate inward for stability.
- To exit this position, inhale deeply and imagine being lifted by your chest. Move slowly and lift your right hand off your foot and bring it to the front of your body, as if someone were pulling you upright. Bring your left arm forward and lift your torso upright. Lower your hips to your heels and your upper body to the ground into Balasana (Child's Pose). Gently rock your pelvis from side to side to soften your back.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—Remind students to begin with the toes curled under and the heels lifted. If, when a student brings the tops of the feet to the ground, the toes point outward, gently brush the outsides of the feet to encourage the student to realign the toes.

Knees and thighs—If the student begins with the knees wider than hip-width apart, cue the student to move the knees closer together before moving into the posture. In addition, remind students to rotate the thighs internally in order to keep the back of the pelvis open. As a reminder, gently brush the outsides of the thighs.

Hips—The hips should remain aligned directly over the knees; however, as students reach for the feet, they often neglect to press the pelvis forward. To adjust, stand or kneel beside the student and place your closest palm on the student's upper pelvis. Move the torso slightly forward and upward while moving the pelvis into alignment over the knees. Another option is to stand in front of the student in a semi-lunge, place a strap around the pelvis, and use the strap to gently draw the student toward you.

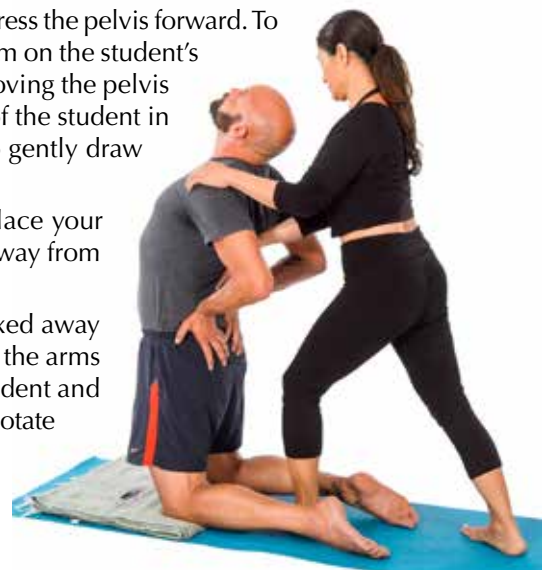
Spine—If the student's low spine is collapsing, kneel to the side, place your hand on the low back, and instruct the student to move the body away from your hand.

Shoulders—The shoulders should be rotated externally and be relaxed away from the ears. To adjust, instruct the student to press firmly through the arms for length. To aid in external rotation, stand or kneel behind the student and place your hands on the shoulders with your thumbs closest to you. Rotate the student's arms so that the shoulder blades come closer together.

Chest—The chest should be higher than the level of the shoulders. To adjust, stand beside the student and place your hand between the shoulder blades, then instruct the student to lift away from your hand.



Adjustment: hips.



Adjustment: shoulders.

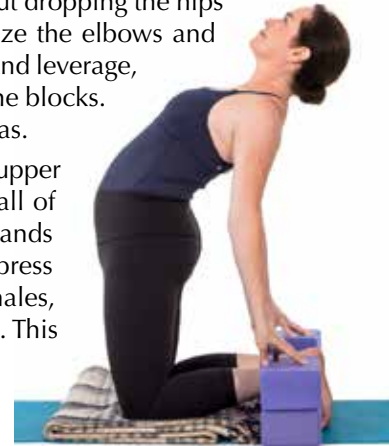
MODIFICATIONS

Neck discomfort—If a student is not comfortable with lowering the head back, instruct the student to tuck the chin into the chest. This modification should be used for those with high blood pressure.

Tight hip flexors—If the student has difficulty bringing the hands to the feet without dropping the hips back, cue the student to place the hands on the back of the pelvis and squeeze the elbows and shoulder blades inward while moving the pelvis forward. For additional support and leverage, place blocks under the student's hands and cue the student to press firmly into the blocks. These modifications help the student build flexibility in the quadriceps and psoas.

Upper spine weakness and tight chest—A student may need assistance to lift the upper spine and rib cage. Sit behind the student as he or she kneels and place the ball of one foot lightly between the student's shoulder blades. Clasp the wrists in your hands and instruct the student to grasp your wrists. While the student inhales, gently press your foot forward against the back while holding the arms. As the student exhales, instruct her or him to move the pelvis forward and relax the shoulders and neck. This action is a Thai yoga therapy technique used to expand the student's chest and shoulders while the instructor supports the weight.

Abdominal weakness—Assist the student in exiting the posture. Standing behind the student in a semi-squat, place your hands between the shoulder blades with your fingers pointing down. As the student inhales, gently press upward on the back to help the student lift upright. Another variation is to stand in a slight lunge in front of the student. Cue the student to reach the right arm forward and clasp your right arm, above the elbow, while you clasp the student's arm. Straighten your legs and lean back slightly to lift the student upright.



Modification: tight hip flexors.

KINEMATICS

With the toes hyperextended, the arch of the foot is stretched as the body weight is moved over the heels. Some students find such positioning fairly uncomfortable at first; encourage them to practice this positioning in order to benefit the structures of the feet.

Ushtrasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe hyperextension	Extensor digitorum longus and hallucis, anterior tibialis, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, posterior tibialis (C, E, I)	Plantar fascia, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, posterior tibialis
	Foot stability	Extensor digitorum longus and hallucis, anterior tibialis, flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, posterior tibialis (I)	
Lower leg	Ankle in dorsiflexion, stability	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus, peroneals (C, I)	Gastrocnemius and soleus
Thigh	Knee flexion, stability	Hamstrings (C, I)	Quadriceps
Hip and pelvis	Hip hyperextension, stability	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris (E, I)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
	Hip stability	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
	Stability	Deep external rotators,* gluteus medius (I)	
Torso	Torso stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (E, I)	Rectus abdominis, obliques
	Spinal stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	
Shoulder	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C, I)	Pectoralis major and minor, anterior deltoid, subscapularis, serratus anterior
	External rotation and stability	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
	Hyperextension and adduction of humerus	Latissimus dorsi, teres major (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension (also aids in hyperextending humerus)	Triceps brachii (C, I)	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis
Lower arm	Forearm supination	Supinator (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger flexion	Flexor digiti minimi brevis, interossei palmaris, flexor pollicis brevis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (E, I)	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes

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

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



Supta Virasana

Reclining Hero Pose

[SOOP-tuh veer-AAH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *supta* means “reclining” or “lying down” and *vira* means “hero,” “chief,” “warrior,” or “champion.” In Latin, *virilis* means “man.” In both the *Mahabharata* (a Hindu epic) and the legend of King Arthur, a man’s secret strength, power, and virility reside symbolically in the thighs.



DESCRIPTION

Supta Virasana is a supine posture in which the knees are bent and the lower legs tucked under or to the outside of the thighs. This pose provides an excellent stretch for the quadriceps.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

First chakra (Muladhara) grounding energy, second chakra (Svadhishthana) creative energy, third chakra (Manipura) vitalizing energy, fourth chakra (Anahata) heart-opening energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the back of the pelvis and the inner thighs. Anchor into the shoulder blades and upper arms.

BENEFITS

- Lengthens the quadriceps and iliopsoas.
- Increases circulation in the legs.
- May help alleviate symptoms of sciatica.
- Gently stretches the abdomen and aids digestion.
- Opens the chest.
- Increases flexibility in the ankles and feet.
- Helps relieve menstrual discomfort.

⚠ CAUTIONS

This pose should be introduced only if students are able to sit comfortably with the buttocks on the ground in the seated version (Virasana). If a student is uncomfortable in the pose, it may be practiced with modifications.

Serious knee or back concerns—Students with knee replacement should avoid this asana. Those with back concerns should practice with modifications.

Pregnancy—Due to hormone-induced laxity in the tendons and ligaments during pregnancy, the reclining version of Virasana should not be practiced past the first trimester.

VERBAL CUES

- From a kneeling position, with the shins and the fronts of the ankles against the ground, slowly lower your hips toward your heels. As you lower, fold forward slightly from your hips and reach behind to grasp your inner calves. Gently roll your calf muscles away from the midline of your body to provide a more open space between your legs. Lower your hips slowly to the ground.
- Make certain that your toes point straight back or slightly inward. As your hips settle, align your shoulders over your hips. Breathe smoothly, making sure that the position is comfortable for your knee joints.
- Inhale, lifting your chest, and extend your arms behind you. Place your hands on the ground in front of your toes. Inhale and press down firmly through your arms to lengthen your torso and low back.
- Exhale and slowly bend one elbow at a time to bring your forearms to the ground. As you breathe, continue to lengthen your rib cage away from your hips. Lower your chin to your chest if doing so feels comfortable. Soften your buttocks and thighs.
- On the next inhalation, slowly extend your arms, one at a time, to the sides of your legs, lowering your back a little closer to the ground. Your breath should be smooth and steady. All the while, ensure that your knee joints and lower back do not feel compromised.
- If you are comfortable, lower your shoulders and head to the ground. Listen to your body and be sure to avoid any strain in your knees or back. Breathe relaxation through the fronts of your thighs and softness and length into your lower back.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- If you are comfortable with your entire back and head resting on the ground, reach your arms overhead and interlace your fingers. Press your palms away from your head and feel the elongation of your entire torso.
- To exit this posture, bring your elbows in to the sides of your waist. Exhale and engage your abdominal muscles while you press your elbows down to lift your shoulders off the ground. Draw your chin into your chest. Press your hands into the ground and slowly straighten one arm at a time. Leading from your chest, slowly lift your torso upright, from the bottom to the top, and raise your head last. Stretch and shake out your legs.

ADJUSTMENTS

Ankles—If the student cannot comfortably rest the tops of the feet on the ground, place a small cushion or rolled-up towel under the ankles. Kneel behind the student and gently rotate the feet so that the toes point straight back or slightly inward.

Knees—Before the student lowers the hips to the ground, be sure that the knees are no farther than hip-width apart. If the knees splay, wrap a strap around the lower thighs to keep the knees together or place a rolled towel between the knees and instruct the student to press into the towel. Another adjustment is to kneel facing the student, place your hands on the mid thighs, and rotate the muscles internally to help keep the knees aligned and relaxed. If the student's knees lift slightly from the ground, and the person would like more stretch in the thighs, place a weighted sandbag or other weighted prop on the lower thighs to increase stretch in the quadriceps and iliopsoas.



Adjustment: knees.

Low back—If the student's back is considerably arched while reclining, first cue the student to exit and then reenter the pose with focus on elongating the spine. If this action does not help, kneel in front of the student's knees and lightly secure the legs. As the spine lowers to the ground again, cue the student to reach the shoulder blades away from the hips in order to encourage more length in the torso.

Chest—The chest should remain lifted, not collapsed. Lightly touch the student's upper sternum with one finger and instruct the student to push upward into your finger.

MODIFICATIONS

Building flexibility and awareness—Instruct the student to practice what is called Ardha Supta Virasana (Half-Reclining Hero Pose). In this variation, only one knee is flexed; the opposite leg stays extended forward. Practice on each side, unless one knee is compromised.

Tightness in the feet, ankles, or knees—Place blankets or a block under the student's hips to support the body weight while taking pressure off the feet, ankles, and knees. Some students may require additional propping to elevate the entire torso; in this instance, the support should extend from the hips to the back of the head.

Overly arched lumbar spine—Place blankets under the student's hips and shoulders to encourage the low back to relax.

Tight hip flexors—If the student is unable to rest the torso on the ground without the knees lifting off the ground, place blankets under the shoulders to raise the student's chest and encourage the legs to relax.



Modification: building flexibility and awareness; tight hip flexors.

KINEMATICS

The focus of this asana is to increase stability and flexibility in the knee joint. And while it may appear to be contraindicated for people with knee pain, when practiced with modifications and props, it can provide a therapeutic lengthening of the quadriceps. However, those with acute knee pain or diagnosed joint injury should refrain from practicing this pose.

Supta Virasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum longus (I)	
Lower leg	Ankle plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (I, R)	Anterior tibialis, peroneals
	Ankle inversion	Posterior tibialis (C, I)	
Thigh	Knee flexion	Quadriceps (E, R)	Quadriceps
Hip and pelvis	Hip and pelvis extension	Iliopsoas, rectus abdominis (E, R)	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris
Torso	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis (E, I)	Rectus abdominis
Shoulder	External rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	Pectoralis major
	Humerus flexion (initial)	Anterior deltoid, pectoralis major (C, I)	
	Humerus flexion (final)	Posterior deltoid, triceps brachii (E)	
Upper arm	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
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, I = isometric contraction, and R = relaxed.

Matsyasana



Fish Pose

[muht-see-YAHH-suh-nuh]

Matsya is a Sanskrit term meaning “fish.” This asana is dedicated to Matsya, the fish incarnation of Vishnu, who saved the first man (Manu) and the seven sages from a great flood.



DESCRIPTION

Matsyasana is a supine backbending posture in which the legs, hips, and crown of the head remain on the ground while the chest and ribs are lifted. Traditionally, Matsyasana is practiced with the legs in Padmasana (Lotus Pose). In another, more challenging variation, the arms and legs are extended and lifted off the ground.

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 into the back of the pelvis. Anchor onto the top of the head.

BENEFITS

- Opens the rib cage, chest, and abdomen.
- Helps with respiratory ailments.
- Gently strengthens the neck.
- Increases circulation in the throat.
- Stimulates the thyroid gland.
- Strengthens the back.
- Improves digestion.

⚠ CAUTIONS

High blood pressure or migraine—Students with high blood pressure or migraine should refrain from practicing this pose.

Insomnia—Students who suffer from insomnia should not practice this posture immediately before trying to sleep.

Neck issues—Students with neck injury should refrain from practicing this pose.

Low back pain—Students with pain the lower back musculature should practice with modifications. Those with acute low back pain or disc injury should refrain from practicing this pose.

VERBAL CUES

If the student is comfortable practicing Padmasana, begin with the legs in that position, reclining with the spine and head resting on the ground. If not, follow the instructions from a straight-leg or bent-knee position.

- Lie supine, with your legs extended and your arms at your sides. Exhale and internally rotate your thighs. As you inhale, bend your elbows and press the backs of your upper arms down into the ground.

- On the next inhalation, lift your back and shoulders off the ground, supported by your arms. Lengthen your neck, then arch your head back to rest the crown of your head on the ground. Continue to elongate your neck on all sides as you breathe deeply. Notice the bridge that your torso forms from your pelvis to the crown of your head.
- If your spine and neck are comfortable in this position, place your palms together over the center of your chest in Anjali Mudra (Prayer Pose). Feel your energy from your heart expand from this space. Continue to elongate through your neck.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- Feel your chest continue to lift and lengthen with each breath. Focus on using your spinal muscles to support your upper body; imagine them lifting your entire torso up from the ground. The weight on your head and through your neck should feel comfortable.
- To exit the position, bring your arms back to your sides. Exhale, and uncross or straighten your legs. Once again, press into the backs of your arms and lift your head from the ground. Draw your chin slowly in toward your chest as you exhale and gently bring the back of your head to the ground. Lower the rest of your torso to the ground slowly. This pose is often used as a counterpose for Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand).

ADJUSTMENTS

Hips—The hips should remain on the ground throughout the pose. If the student presses against the ground and lifts the hips (which happens often when the pose is practiced with the knees bent), instruct the student to anchor into the back of the pelvis in order to keep the hips rooted. To assist, kneel beside the student and lightly place your hands on the lower thighs or, if the legs are bent, on the knees. This subtle reminder helps the student focus on securing the hips to the ground.

Chest—If the chest or rib cage collapses, kneel above the student's head, place your hands behind the shoulder blades, and cue the student to lift the back away from your hands.



Adjustment: chest.

Head—The student's head should touch the ground with the crown—not with the back of the head. Instruct the student to press down strongly with the arms in order to create more lift in the chest and to hyperextend the neck until the crown rests on the ground. The chest adjustment is also appropriate for realigning the head, as well.

MODIFICATIONS

Discomfort—If a student is uncomfortable in Padmasana, cue the student to bring the legs into Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), which helps open the hips. Some students may also find it more comfortable to simply bend the knees with the feet flat on the ground.

Straining—If a student's face is strained or red, or if the breath is labored, place the student in a less demanding asana, such as Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose).

Neck or low-back pain—Place folded blankets or bolsters under the student's shoulders to relieve the back muscles.

Posture deepening—If students are comfortable, cue them to deepen the pose by lifting the legs and arms off the ground while maintaining the rest of the pose. You may need to help a student hold the limbs in this position. To do so, kneel or squat by the student's feet and place your hands under the heels for light support.



Modification: deepening the posture.

KINEMATICS

In order to eliminate the possibility of straining the neck muscles, the crown of the head, not the back of the head, should rest on the ground.

Matsyasana

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes	Toe flexion	Flexor digitorum and hallucis longus, flexor digitorum brevis (C, I)	
Lower leg	Plantar flexion	Gastrocnemius, soleus (C, I)	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus
Thigh	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris (C, I)	
Torso	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis, quadratus lumborum (I)	Rectus abdominis
	Spinal hyperextension	Erector spinae, semispinalis, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids, mid trapezius (C)	Anterior deltoid, pectoralis major and minor
	Humerus hyperextension	Latissimus dorsi, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
Upper arm	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (C, I)	
Lower arm	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres and quadratus (C, I)	
	Wrist extension, stability	Flexor digitorum profundus and superficialis (I)	
Hand and fingers	Finger extension and stability	Flexor digitorum profundus and superficialis, flexor digiti minimi, interossei (C, I)	
Neck	Neck hyperextension, stability	Sternocleidomastoid, scalenes (E, I)	
	Neck stability	Cervical erector spinae, splenius capitis and cervicis, upper trapezius (C, I)	

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

Supta Padangusthasana

Reclining Hand-to-Toe Pose

[SOOP-tuh paah-daahng-oost-AHH-suh-nuh]

In Sanskrit, *supta* means “reclining,” *pada* means “foot,” and *angustha* means “big toe.”

DESCRIPTION

Supta Padangusthasana is a supine position in which one leg is flexed at the hip and the big toe of the same-side foot is typically grasped by the same-side hand. This is often used as a transitional asana to move from the more active phase of a session into more relaxing and restorative poses near the end.



ENERGETIC FOCUS

First chakra (Muladhara) grounding energy, second chakra (Svadhithana) creative energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root into the back of the pelvis and the back of the heel of the grounded leg. Anchor the hand or a strap around the lifted leg.

BENEFITS

- Lengthens the hamstrings and hips without any strain on the back.
- Stretches the calves and arches.
- Stimulates the reproductive organs.
- Relaxes the spine.
- Aids digestion.

⚠ CAUTION

Pregnancy—Instruct pregnant women to lie on the side instead of on the back and to flex the top leg toward the chest.

VERBAL CUES

- From a supine position, with your arms at your sides and your legs straight, press firmly into your left leg and, as you exhale, draw your right knee into your chest. Hug the leg in to stretch your low back but keep your shoulders relaxed.
- Inhale and slowly straighten your knee, lifting your right foot toward the sky. The knee should remain as straight as possible without locking. Be mindful of any discomfort in your low back or hamstrings. If your back feels compromised, bend your left knee and bring your left heel to the ground as close to your sit bones as is comfortable.

- Reach up with your right hand and grab as close to your right toes as possible—wherever you can reach comfortably. Your shoulders and hips should remain on the ground. Feel your back sink into the support of the ground.
- Inhale deeply and anchor your left leg more firmly into the ground. As you exhale, press your navel toward the ground while lifting your chest and head toward your right foot. Send energy through your right heel and point your toes toward your head. This helps to lengthen the hamstrings and keep the abdominal muscles engaged. Imagine your breath lengthening your leg.



Lengthening the hamstrings.

- As you breathe, allow your abdomen to soften and relax your shoulders. Exhale, maintaining length in your leg, and slowly lower your head and shoulders back to the ground. Continue to breathe length through your leg.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- To exit the position, release your right hand to your side and slowly lower your leg back to the ground. If your low back feels uncomfortable, slightly bend your knee. As your leg rests on the ground, notice that your right leg feels longer and more relaxed than your left. Rest for a few breaths, then prepare to practice on the left side.

ADJUSTMENTS

Feet—If the heel of the lifted leg is not higher than the toes, instruct the student to point the toes down toward the head more fully. To guide the toes lower, you can gently press down on the ball of the foot.

Knee—If the student bends the knee in an effort to grasp the toes, adjust the hands to a position where the student can hold on comfortably or offer a strap to wrap around the foot while maintaining as much knee extension as possible.

Hips—If the leg extended on the ground is comfortable but lifts off the ground, kneel beside the student and press gently on the top of the thigh, near the hip. Do not press near the knee joint. A weighted sandbag can also be placed at the top of the thigh.

Shoulders—The shoulders should remain relaxed. Especially when the torso is lifted, students have a tendency to round the shoulders and lift them toward the ears. To adjust, kneel beside the student and gently place your hands on the tops of the shoulders as a guide to relax and keep space between the ears and shoulders. Cue the student to elongate the sides of the neck.

Neck—Remind the student to keep the ears aligned with the shoulders and not to drop the head back or bring the chin to the chest while lifting the torso. Kneel beside the student and place your hand lightly on the back of the head. If the head drops back, instruct the student to move the back of the head away from your hand. If the neck is flexed, cue the student to press lightly into the back of your hand until the ears are aligned with the shoulders.

MODIFICATIONS

Tight hamstrings—If the student is unable to reach the hand to the foot without bending the knee, wrap a strap around the ball of the foot and place the loose ends in the student's hand. Instruct the student to find the place where she or he feels comfortably challenged while still extending the knee as much as possible.

Overly tight spine—Instruct the student to bend the knee of the anchoring leg, placing the foot flat on the ground. This modification helps eliminate strain in the low back.

Spinal weakness—Place the student in a position where the back is on the ground and the legs are up against a wall with the hips and the backs of the legs touching the wall. Instruct the student to flex one hip more deeply so that the leg moves closer to the chest while keeping the knee extended. This modification reduces strain on the back while still allowing the hamstring to stretch.



Modification: spinal weakness.

KINEMATICS

Resting the torso on the ground in the beginning and ending phases of this asana allows the student to focus on stretching the hamstrings and hips while the spine remains in alignment. With the posterior shoulder muscles pressed into the ground, one can take a true measure of flexibility in the hamstrings and posterior hips; in contrast, in seated and standing forward bends, the range of motion is often distorted by flexion in the torso.

Supta Padangusthasana (Right Hip Flexed)

Body segment	Kinematics	Muscles active	Muscles released
Foot and toes (R)	Toe abduction	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe dorsiflexion	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
Foot and toes (L)	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum and hallucis longus, anterior tibialis (C, I)	
Lower leg (R)	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (C)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
Lower leg (L)	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum and hallucis longus (C, I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
Thigh (R)	Knee extension	Quadriceps, gracilis (C, I)	
Thigh (L)	Knee extension	Quadriceps (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis (R)	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris, pectineus (C, I)	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus
Hip and pelvis (L)	Hip extension, stability	Hamstrings, gluteus maximus (C, I)	
Torso	Trunk stability	Rectus abdominis, internal and external obliques, transverse abdominis, quadratus lumborum (C, I)	
Shoulder (R)	Shoulder flexion	Anterior deltoid, pectoralis major (C, I)	
	External humerus rotation	Infraspinatus, teres minor (C, I)	
	Scapular adduction	Rhomboids, trapezius (C, I)	
Shoulder (L)	Shoulder abduction	Deltoids (C, I)	
Upper arm (R)	Elbow extension	Triceps brachii (C, I)	
Upper arm (L)	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachioradialis (C, I)	
Lower arm (R)	Forearm supination	Supinator (C, I)	
	Elbow extension	Anconeus (C, I)	
Lower arm (L)	Forearm pronation	Pronator teres (C, I)	
Hand and fingers (R)	Wrist extension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (I)	
	Finger flexion	Flexor digitorum, extensor digiti minimi brevis, dorsal interossei (C, I)	
Hand and fingers (L)	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension and stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis (I)	

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, I = isometric contraction, L = left, and R = right.