

# Yoga for Upper Body

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Whether you are a recreational exerciser or serious fitness enthusiast, there are many benefits of a well-balanced strength training programme and it's an essential element towards reaching your optimum health. Here **Sally Parkes** provides you with a great yoga routine that will strengthen, lengthen and tone your upper body.



## Garudasana

Eagle Pose, stretches all the major joints of the body and is especially effective when used as part of a warm up.

Stand tall at the top of your yoga mat, stretch the arms up toward the sky and then sweep the right arm under the left so the arms are in front of your torso, then bend your elbows. Place the left elbow into the crook of the right and raise the forearms perpendicular to the floor so the upper back

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starts to stretch. Press the right hand to the right and the left hand to the left, so that the palms are now facing each other. Now press the palms together and lift your elbows up towards the sky a little, keeping the shoulders drawing downwards to help engage the Supraspinatus muscles.

Bend your knees so you are in a squat position, keeping the heels on the ground. Lift your right foot up. Balance on your left foot and cross your right thigh over the left. Point your right toes toward the floor and then hook the top of the foot behind the lower left calf. If the foot does not tuck behind the calf muscle do not force it as this can injure the knee joint. Balance on the left foot. Hold for at least five breaths.

# Strength

It's quite common that most of the yoga asanas (yoga postures) we do in a typical class will emphasise stretching and strengthening of the lower body. This is because many of the basic traditional asanas are standing postures and it's important to get a strong foundation in these before moving on to more technical asanas. Furthermore, big compound movements such as Crescent Lunge and Warrior Two encourage the heart rate to increase and our body to warm up more quickly and so these movements are a useful pre-cursor to deeper stretches. To balance our skeletal muscular system it's obviously very important to include upper body work as well. Commonly we tend to train the deltoids, pectorials, biceps, triceps and the back, but by using our body weight as we do in yoga it is also possible to engage the upper and lower trapezius, the rhomboids and supraspinatus. These are all important stabilising muscles that are required for a healthy posture. Strength in these areas will also help to reduce the risk of injury by providing a strong foundation on which to build more strength for example by using weights.

**The following sequence uses only body weight as resistance.**

**Note:** to engage the supporting muscles extra attention to alignment is required.

**Ensure you are warmed up before beginning this yoga sequence.**

**Practice it either toward the end of your training session or after several Sun Salutations.**

## Revolved Side Angle Pose

Slowly move out of Eagle Pose and step back with the right leg and bend the left leg to a right angle with the knee over the ankle. The back leg is straight with the toes tucked under and the heel off the ground. Now bring the hands into a prayer position at the chest and as you exhale, rotate the upper body deeply to the left, pressing the outside of the right elbow to the outside of the left thigh. You should feel the latissimus dorsi (muscles to the sides of your back) stretching and strengthening simultaneously. Contract the abdomen and allow the hips to drop a little further, working more deeply into the hips. Rotate a little more to the left side and draw the shoulder downwards to help engage the upper postural muscles. The chin stays in line with the chest. Hold for five breaths.





## Bakasana

Slowly untwist the torso and place the hands to the ground before stepping the right foot to the top of the mat. Have the feet hip-distance apart. The hands are on the ground, shoulder-distance apart with the middle finger pointing forwards. Now bend the knees whilst keeping the hips high and place the knees at the top of the triceps, near the under arms. Transfer the body weight forwards, press the knees firmly into the arms and engage the entire body, especially the core area. Allow the feet to lift from the floor and look slightly forwards. Hold for five breaths.

Now from Bakasana jump back quickly and strongly into a plank position using the power of the legs and abdomen. Then move the hips backwards so you now transition into Downward Dog.

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## Downward Dog

Press firmly into the hands and externally rotate the arms slightly so the shoulder blades move away from one another and downwards allowing more space across the lower trapezius and rhomboids.

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## Plank into Low Plank

Maintain this alignment of the shoulders whilst moving into High Plank position. Keep a neutral line from the back of the neck through to the heels so the core area has to engage. Again externally rotate the arms slightly and keep the shoulders drawing downwards. Press each joint of the hands, fingers and thumbs firmly into the ground to evenly spread the weight. Now contract the quadriceps by pressing back firmly through the heels and slowly lower the entire body down into a Low Plank position. Hold for five breaths before slowly moving back into High Plank. Hold again for five breaths before pressing back into Downward Dog.

Move back to your start position at the top of the mat and repeat, this time leading with the left leg. Ensure you move slowly and consciously and pay extra attention to the alignment of each asana so the smaller stabilising muscles are engaged sufficiently.

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Sally Parkes, BSc runs retreats and fully certified Yoga Teacher Training and Pregnancy Teacher Training in the UK and Spain.  
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