

Yoga for a healthy spine

By **Sally Parkes**

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A strong back and a healthy spine are essential for our general wellbeing and they literally provide the back bone to our resistance training. When we feel strong on a physical level we are generally more active, more sociable and our self-confidence is enhanced.

On a more spiritual level, a healthy spine is also a sign that the energy centre that grounds us, called our Root Chakra (or Muladhara in Sanskrit), is well balanced. This offers us feelings of stability, clarity and contentment, which in turn allow us to lead a more fulfilled life. When there are problems with the spine however, the opposite can occur and the spine literally becomes unstable, having a huge effect on our health. A spine that is not functioning properly can have a huge knock on effect to our daily life by greatly affecting us on a physical, mental and emotional level. Therefore keeping it healthy is paramount to our health.

As we know, the regular practice of yoga asana can keep us physically healthy and in great shape. However, to maintain the health of our back and spine and to achieve a healthy and balanced movement pattern, our yoga asana practice needs to include movement that stretches, rotates, extends and strengthens the spine and its surrounding muscles and connective tissue. These are all natural movements of the spine but even in our yoga practice it is easy to do too much of one movement and not enough of others, leading us to physical imbalances and eventually injuries caused by overuse. Articulation of the spine for example, such as that shown in 'Rolling Down' below, is an important movement as it helps to keep healthy mobility of the middle (thoracic) spine.

The following asana sequence will help you maintain the health of your spine by creating a healthy and balanced movement pattern:

Rolling Down



Stand with the feet hip-width apart and parallel to one another. Bend the knees slightly, lightly contract the abdominal muscles and tuck the pelvis under slightly. Allow the neck to completely relax, drop the chin to the chest and start to roll down through the spine with the arms completely relaxed. Move slowly throughout. When the hands are in-line with the knees (or lower if your body allows it), start to roll back up to standing, keeping the knees slightly bent. A visualisation that may help you with this movement is to imagine you are un-stacking the spine and the restacking it as you roll back up. Repeat 3-4 times.

Benefits:

It mobilises the spine, in particular the thoracic spine. It stretches the muscles of the back, especially the spinal extensors and the hamstrings and improves body and postural awareness and is a mentally calming movement.

Ardha Chandrasana: Crescent Moon

Stand in Mountain Pose with the feet together and arms down by your side. Now reach the arms up over head, interlace the fingers and extend the first finger. Tuck the pelvis under slightly to encourage a neutral alignment and drop the shoulders down away from the ears. Contact the legs including the glutes. Hold your chin level with the floor and keep the legs strong and stretch the entire body upwards. As you exhale, bend sideways to the right whilst maintaining the lift through the spine, especially in the lower back area. You will feel compression through the right side of the rib cage and oblique muscles and a strong stretch through the left side. Hold for five breaths and repeat on the other side.

Benefits:

This posture encourages a sideways bend (lateral flexion) of the spine. This is not a movement we do often other than in asana practice, but is useful to keep healthy mobility of the middle spine and rib cage and its surrounding connective tissue in particular.

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Utkatasana: Chair Pose

Stand in Mountain Pose. Exhale and bend the knees so you are in a squat position with the feet together. At the same time sweep the arms upward so they are in-line with the ears. The hands are shoulder-width distance apart or wider if the shoulders feel tight. Press the thighs together and lengthen the spine by keeping the chest lifted and the chin parallel to the ground. Spread the toes and maintain even weight distribution through the feet. Draw the shoulders downwards, away from the ears. Hold for five breaths.

Benefits:

As the spine is extended in this asana, the entire back is both stretched and strengthened. Also, by raising the arms in this posture, the muscles of the back have to work more strongly.

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Bhujangasana: Cobra

Lay face down with the legs together and place the hands on the ground in-line with the chest with the arms pressed against the rib cage. Press the tops of the feet into the floor to activate the legs and gluteal muscles. Lightly press into the hands and lift the head, chest and shoulders away from the floor. Actively draw the shoulders down and away from the ears and keep the chin level to the floor. Think about lengthening from the navel to the chin whilst the spinal extensors contract strongly. Hold for five breaths.

Benefits:

This asana stretches and extends the spine, increasing both its flexibility and strength. Cobra is also beneficial for the digestive system it applies slight pressure to the abdomen and helps to massage the internal organs.



Parivrtta Trikonasana: Revolved Triangle

Step the feet approximately one metre apart and place the hands on the hip bones. Turn the left foot in forty-five degrees to the right and the right foot out to the right ninety-degrees. Ideally align the right heel with the left heel but if that restricts the rotation of the pelvis, then step the left foot out to the left 3-4 inches/10-12cm. Turn the torso to the right and extend the spine forwards until the upper body is parallel to the ground. Reach the left hand down to the shin or onto a yoga block (positioned against your inner right foot). Extend the right arm up and rotate the torso so the right shoulder stacks on top of the left shoulder. Keep the chin in line with the sternum to avoid strain in the neck. Hold for five breaths and repeat on the other side.

Benefits:

This asana rotates the spine strongly, especially the middle spine. As there is an element of balancing in this posture, the spinal stabilisers are also strengthened as they work to support the spine. It also strongly stretches the hamstrings and calf muscles.

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Please note this yoga sequence is intended for those with severe back pain or injury.

Sally Parkes BSc has been teaching since 1998 and runs Yoga and Pilates retreats in the UK and Spain. Sally also runs fully certified Yoga Teacher Training and First Aid for Yoga Teachers Training in the UK. Email info@sallyparkesyoga.com for more info or visit www.sallyparkesyoga.com