

# Chair yoga: Benefits of a mind-body practice without the risk of falling

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One aspect many practitioners love about yoga is how welcoming and inclusive it can be. The ancient movement and meditation practice can work for everyone. And there are no prerequisites to giving it a try, other than curiosity and a desire to improve your fitness, flexibility, and strength.

Case in point: You can even practice yoga seated in a chair.

## What is chair yoga?

Chair yoga is exactly what it sounds like: yoga that is performed while seated in a chair. Every pose, breathing exercise, or meditation is done while sitting down.

The term may also be used to describe yoga positions that are done while standing but holding onto a chair for added support. This article will use the term to describe yoga positions done in a seated position.

## Could chair yoga be right for you?

Anyone can try chair yoga. But it's especially helpful for anyone who has difficulty balancing, standing for a long time, or getting up from or down on the floor, where yoga is traditionally performed.

Chair yoga is also a great option for a quick stretch if you'll be sitting for a while, such as on a long car or plane trip or at your desk during a busy workday.

## Benefits of yoga

Yoga has been linked to a long list of health benefits, and larger, longer-term studies are in progress. Based on what we've learned thus far, the perks of a regular yoga practice may include:

- lower stress
- reduced risk of heart disease
- more stable blood sugar
- less back and arthritis pain
- sharper memory
- less anxiety and depression
- better sleep
- greater happiness
- weight loss.

## Benefits of chair yoga

Chair yoga can deliver the above benefits while providing a more stable, seated base from which to exercise.

In one small study among older adults with osteoarthritis in the lower body (for example, knees and hips), doing chair yoga exercises for 45 minutes twice a week for eight weeks led to less pain and fatigue, compared to participating in a health education program. Another small study found adults with knee osteoarthritis were better able to carry out their daily activities after a 12-week chair yoga program.

In a third study, older adults experienced greater stress reduction after participating in a six-week chair yoga program, compared to those who participated in six weeks of chair aerobics, walking, or social games.

## Chair yoga workout

If you'd like to give chair yoga a try, you can start with the five chair yoga positions described below. You can do the exercises in a sequence, or pick a couple of the movements to try any time you want a quick stretch.

Check with your doctor before doing these moves if you have back, shoulder, or hip problems, or recently had abdominal, shoulder, or hip surgery.

### Seated crescent



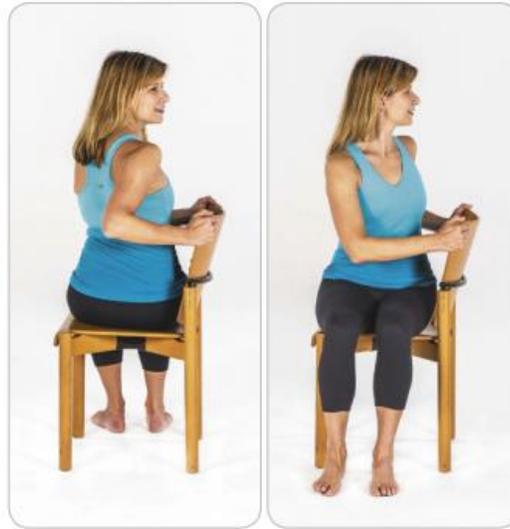
- Sit up straight in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Relax your arms at your sides. Tighten your abdominal muscles to support your back.
- As you inhale, raise your right arm overhead, drawing your fingertips and the crown of your head toward the ceiling. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down, away from your ears.
- As you exhale, bend to the left. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths.
- On an inhale, straighten your body.
- Lower your arm as you exhale.
- Repeat, raising your left arm and bending to the right. That's one repetition.
- Continue alternating sides for 3 to 5 repetitions total.

## Back bend



- Sit up straight on the edge of a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Place your hands on the seat of the chair with your fingertips pointing toward you.
- As you inhale, roll your shoulders back. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down, away from your ears, throughout the entire movement.
- Gently lift your chest toward the ceiling, arching your back. Don't excessively arch your back or hyperextend your neck. You should be gazing up at the ceiling in front of you. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths.
- Release on an exhalation.
- Complete 3 to 5 repetitions.

## Spinal twist



- Sit sideways on an armless chair. Sit up straight with your feet flat on the floor. Place one hand on either side of the chair back. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down, away from your ears. Inhale.
- As you exhale, gently rotate your torso to the right, toward the back of the chair, looking over your right shoulder. You should feel a stretch in your torso and neck, but do not strain or force the position. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths.
- As you inhale, return to center.
- Complete 3 to 5 reps to the right, then sit the opposite way and repeat, twisting to the left.

## Pigeon



- Sit up straight toward the edge of a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Place your left ankle across your right thigh.
- As you inhale, sit up tall. Don't round your back; keep your spine elongated.

- If you feel a stretch in your left hip, then hold here. If not, gently press down on your left knee with your left hand, and on an exhale, lean forward slightly until you feel a stretch. Keep your chest lifted as you lean forward. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths.
- Release on an exhale.
- Do 3 to 5 reps total on that side, then repeat with your right ankle across your left thigh.

## Shoulder stretch



- Sit up straight in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal muscles to support your back. Hold a strap or a towel in your right hand.
- Inhale while raising your right arm over your head.
- Bend your right elbow so your right hand is behind your head and the strap or towel is hanging down your back.
- On an inhale, extend your left arm down at your side, and then bend your left elbow so your left hand is behind your back. Grasp the strap or towel with your left hand.
- If you feel a stretch in your shoulders and arms, hold here. If not, walk your hands toward each other until you feel a stretch. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down, away from your ears.
- Release on an exhale.
- Repeat in the other direction, holding the strap or towel in your left hand. That's one rep.
- Continue alternating sides until you've completed 3 to 5 reps total.

## **Safety tips for chair yoga**

When you're exercising on a chair, you need to make sure your seat is safe and sturdy. Your chair shouldn't tip, wobble, roll, or move easily. Choose a chair without arms so you have more room to move in different directions.

As with any new exercise, start slowly, giving yourself time to get used to the movements and see how your body reacts. Never push yourself to the point of strain or pain in any chair yoga position.

**Exercise photos by Michael Carroll**