

# **10 Yoga Poses for Low Back Pain Prevention**

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## **Introduction**

This series of poses is designed to prevent future back pain and also to relieve back pain that you may already have. We caution you that not all back pain is the same; it is very important to determine the cause of pain if possible, since different conditions require different remedies.

Note that not all of these poses will suit all conditions, and there are certainly many other beneficial poses not included here. This series is offered as a starting point for those who are prone to lower back pain. Serious injuries and chronic conditions will require guidance from an experienced professional.

The first three poses are gentle preparations for the other poses. The first two are examples of good posture in sitting and standing.

### **1. Thigh widening and Pressure Cooker**

Sitting in a chair, bring both hands to the top of one leg, where it joins the hip, and lean away from that side so there is less weight on the hip. With one hand on each side, widen the buttock and upper thigh to the side, turning the inner edge downward, then sit back down. Repeat on the other side. This adjustment turns the thighs inward, positions you more fully on your sitting bones and allows the sacrum to lift better. Prolonged sitting with a collapse in the sacral area is an invitation for back pain. When you have made this adjustment, sit up tall with your shoulders back, and gently tone your abdominal muscles.



**Pressure Cooker:** Bring your hands to the outer edges of your knees, and press in to provide resistance. Use thigh strength to push out against your hands, and use both the inner and outer thighs actively. This pose can also be done standing, with a belt around the legs below the knees.



## 2. Tadasana, the Mountain Pose

In this pose you can adjust your alignment to promote healthy use of the legs, pelvis and spine for daily posture. Because one's posture is habitual, extra care is needed to refine this most basic pose. The most common set of poor habits is: pelvis pushed forward, lower back flattened, and chest collapsing down.



Stand with your feet hip-width apart and parallel, legs straight, arms hanging at your sides.

Balance your weight evenly between your two feet, and on the four corners of each foot.

Take a breath to enliven your body, tone your leg muscles, and lengthen your spine. Then move the tops of your thighs back until they are over your ankles. You can look in a mirror or have a friend check this alignment. Widen your thighs as you did in #1, then curl your tailbone down which lengthens the

lower back.

Firm and lift your abdominal muscles. Bring your shoulder blades toward the spine to support this lift of your chest. From the pelvis, stretch down through your legs and up through your spine, as you breathe normally. Create the dignity and strength of the mountain.

### 3. Windshield Wiper

Lie on the floor with your knees bent, feet wide apart, arms extended out on the floor above shoulder height. Inhale and lengthen your torso, then bring the right knee across the midline and down toward your left foot.

Stretch your right leg and arm away from center strongly. You may feel a stretch in your thigh, hip, waist area, chest, shoulder and arm. This pose widens the pelvis by adducting the leg, and stretches the side body which will permit the spine to lengthen more easily in all poses. It also helps to expand the breath. You are stretching and coordinating the quadriceps, psoas, quadratus lumborum, latissimus dorsi, and pectoralis major, all of which are muscles that can support or derail good posture, and many of which can cause back pain.

Repeat on the other side, and repeat both sides if you wish.



#### 4. Supta Padangustasana

This hamstring stretch will reduce the tendency toward a flat back, and allow more freedom of movement between the legs and spine in daily movements and exercise.



Lie on your back. Arrange a blanket so that the lower edge comes to the small of your back, with your buttocks on the floor. This will support the proper curve in the lower back while you stretch your legs. If your legs are tight, do this stretch with the second leg bent. If you are more limber, keep the second leg flat on the floor.

As you inhale, turn your thighs in and move your groins down toward the floor, which will arch your lower back. Contract your abdomen in and up, and lengthen your tailbone toward your heels without flattening your lower back. These actions stabilize the pelvis and the lumbar spine.



Place the belt around your right foot and straighten the leg up. Hold one end of the belt with each hand. Stretch your knee straight, firming all the muscles in your thigh as you extend the heel up.

Breathe and release any unnecessary tension elsewhere in your body, especially your shoulders and neck. Push the right thigh away from you, against the resistance of the belt. Note that the goal is not to force your foot toward your head, because that will compromise your lower back.

Hold the pose for at least 30 seconds, then release and repeat on the other side. This pose stretches the gluteus muscles, hamstrings, the iliocostalis muscles

and the quadratus lumborum, a group responsible for a good deal of musculoskeletal back pain.

## 5. Shalabhasana

This pose strengthens the spinal muscles which will improve support for upright posture. It is excellent for pain caused by herniated discs, but is to be avoided in spinal stenosis.

Lie on your stomach on a mat, with a folded blanket under your abdomen to prevent lower back strain. Stretch your arms out to the sides, palms down. Place your forehead on the floor. Take a breath to expand inside.



Prepare for this backbend with strength, drawing the muscles of your arms and legs into the core. Lengthen your legs and tailbone without squeezing your buttocks together. Bring your shoulder blades toward your spine before rising up; this will activate your upper back muscles.

Inhale and lift your arms, head and legs a little off the floor, extending out from your center as you lift. Try to be as even as you can from side to side. As you stay in the pose, breathe to maintain lightness and length. Release down and possibly repeat the pose again.

## 6. Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana)

The classic dog pose stretches the entire back body, including the shoulders, chest, spine, hips and legs, and strengthens the back muscles.

Come down onto your mat on hands and knees. Place your hands shoulder width apart and the index fingers pointing forward. Walk your knees back a few inches. Press your fingers down and spread your hands to provide a firm foundation. With your arms firm, connect your upper body and shoulders to your arms by softening down just a little with your chest. This will prevent overstretching of the shoulder muscles.



Tuck your toes under, pointing them forward. Breathe to lengthen the spine.

Inhaling, bring your knees off the floor, and exhaling, pull your hips and thighs back and up. Attempt to arch your lumbar spine which may require you to keep your knees bent. Your sitting bones reach up and apart from each other.

Use your breath to charge the pose with strength, and lengthen your spine and legs maximally. Expand out from the center of your body to the periphery. The heels do not need to touch the floor.

To release, bring your knees back to the floor. This pose assists in creating a normal curvature of the lower back, and stretches the latissimus dorsi, hamstrings, gluteus and calf muscles. It's a great help for musculoskeletal back pain.

## **7. Standing lunge with chair for the Psoas Muscle**

This pose stretches the front of the hips, important for people who sit a lot at work. A tight psoas muscle can compress the lumbar spine and sacroiliac joint.

We show this pose with a chair, which helps with balance for beginners.

Stand facing the back of your chair. Bend your right knee as you step the left foot back. Bring the right shin to vertical. Hold the back of the chair for support.

Balance your weight evenly on the four corners of the right foot, and the ball of the left foot.

Lean forward a little, fully stretch your back leg, and firm your legs and your pelvic bones and upper thighs, then draw your belly in and up to stabilize your pelvis and hips.

Carefully bring your torso upright and pull your shoulders back until they are over your hips.



At this point you can keep your hands on the chair for balance, and look up, stretching the front of your torso.



Or you can release your hands from the chair and reach them up near your ears. Breathe fully and confidently as you maintain all actions.

Touch the chair and step the back foot forward to change sides.

This pose is excellent for treating as well as preventing herniated lumbar discs.

## 8. Chair Twist

This gentle twist mobilizes the thoracic spine and is a chance to practice stabilizing the lumbar spine. Often the thoracic spine is stiff, forcing too much movement demand into the lumbar. Do not practice this twist if you have a recently herniated or bulging disc.

Sit sideways in a chair without arms with your right side close to the chair back. Set your legs hip-width apart and parallel, with your knees vertically over your ankles.



Manually widen your buttocks and upper thighs as in our first exercise, and sit tall.

Reach your tailbone lightly downward and lift your lower belly in and up to stabilize the lumbar spine.

Inhale and lengthen up through the spine, and pull your shoulder blades together onto your back, so that the actions of your arms will affect your torso and spine.

As you exhale, twist to the right, holding the chair with your hands.



Coordinate your actions with your breath: inhale as you lengthen up through the spine, and exhale as you twist. Use your breath to coax more movement in the spine and ribs, but hold your pelvis very steady.

Another way to keep the pelvis steady is to pull back through your left thigh, toward your hip socket. This will counteract the tendency for the pelvis to turn with the spine.

Return to center and turn your body 180 degrees to twist the other way.

## 9. Childs Pose

This pose is excellent for a moderate stretch of the back extensors, especially quadratus lumborum and erector spinae. It is better for spinal stenosis than herniated disc.

Place a blanket on your mat and possibly have washcloths ready, to put behind your knees for extra space there if you need it. Come onto your hands and knees. If your feet are stiff, extend them half on and half off the back edge of the blanket.

Separate your knees about hip width apart or a bit more, and extend your spine forward over your thighs. Fold your hips back toward your heels. If your knees are uncomfortable, put the washcloths behind your knees, between the thighs and calves.



Your head can rest on the floor, on your folded hands, or on a block or folded blanket. You can also stretch your arms forward on the floor.

Breathe deeply, coming to rest and releasing tension in your body and mind.

## 10. Savasana with Knee Support

Savasana is a pose in which to relax and consolidate gains from your practice. It is an essential transition between the yoga practice and the rest of your day.

The picture shows the pose done with two blankets and a belt, but you can do it lying flat with no props. The rolled blanket under your knees is good for releasing muscular tension and gently lengthening the lower back. The belt is helpful for those with sacroiliac pain. Note that the belt is not tight, but it supports the legs in a symmetrical position.



Lie on your back with arms at your sides, about twelve inches from your body with your palms up. Adjust your thighs by rolling them inward as in #1, then let them relax.

Manually lengthen your buttocks away from your head if you feel any compression in the lower back.

Tuck your shoulders gently in toward the spine to open the front of the chest.

Make sure that your neck is long and your chin and forehead are level. If you need to place a folded blanket under your head to achieve this, do so.

Guide your whole body to relax deeply from head to toe. Do not fret if your mind produces thoughts; just be a compassionate witness without jumping into their content. Trust in the process of letting go deeply. Steady breathing will quiet the mind.

After 5 - 10 minutes of quiet rest, take a few deeper breaths, stretch your arms and legs gently, bend your knees, and softly roll to one side. When you are ready, come back up to sitting, noticing the effects of your practice.