



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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Strong Abdominal Muscles and Strong Backs

This month in our classes we will be concentrating on bringing strength and flexibility to our abdominal muscles and lower back muscles known as **'core strength'**. The modern sedentary lifestyle has created an epidemic of weak abdominals and a dangerous tendency to use back muscles to compensate. When the abdominals aren't strong enough to do a posture, such as a leg lift while lying on your back, people will lift their legs by pulling from the lower back, which can cause injury. Most yoga teachers agree that a strong, healthy abdominal region is essential to a strong, healthy practice.

Yoga is excellent for building healthy abdominals because it involves moving the body in various directions and angles through postures requiring stability and balance. The key is flexible strength, and that's what yoga develops. One reason the abdominals are so weak is that most people sit with their backs rounded, which makes the abdominal muscles go slack. Weak abdominals and damaged lower backs are common in our culture and core strength is essential in every posture.

I will be including at least 15 minutes of abdominal strengtheners in every class. I always pay attention to the abdominals because strengthening these muscles helped me to overcome long-term severe back pain.

I know that people tend to really hate doing abdominal work, because it's a painful area that many find hard to access, but after a while, your stronger abdominals will help you in many of the postures and your back will become stronger.

Positive Effects

Some of the positive effects you may notice from developing a healthy 'core' include an overall increase in energy levels, a decreased occurrence of injuries, improved posture, diminished muscle tension, and improved performance and quality of life.

When Your Core is Weak

Problems can occur if your core muscles are weak such as:

- Chronic lower back pain
- Hip and knee injuries
- Shoulder and neck tension
- Repetitive strain injuries in the shoulder, neck or arm due to posture and compensation changes.

Importance of the Bandhas

Mula Bandha - A well functioning mula bandha has a deeply stabilizing impact on health and wellbeing. It is support for your internal organs, stability for your pelvis, and helps to strengthen your back. A good way to understand its location is to imagine that you need to go to the toilet and there is none in sight. Which muscles would you use to resist this urge? Women engage these muscles to tone the pelvic floor after childbirth.

Uddiyana Bandha - Activating the uddiyana bandha will help to strengthen the muscles covering the front of the abdominal wall from the pelvis to the bottom ribs. This bandha is performed by first exhaling fully and then drawing the lower belly inward and upward. Think of it as drawing the point just below your navel towards your spine.

Full explanations of how to perform these bandhas will be given during our classes.

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Posture of the Month – Paripurna Navasana (Boat posture)

In this asana, the body takes the shape of a boat. The word *paripurna* means 'complete' or 'full' in Sanskrit, while *nava* means 'boat'. The use of a belt in this asana allows the posture to be held without straining the stomach and back muscles. Regular practice of this asana tones the abdominal muscles and organs. It also exercises the neck and stimulates the thyroid gland.

1. Sit on the floor with your legs stretched straight in front. Place your palms on the floor by your hips, your fingers pointing to your feet. Stretch your hands straight and keep your back erect. This position is called Dandasana.
2. Breathe in and as you breathe out, lean back slightly putting weight in your hands and raise your legs from the floor. Keep your legs straight with your knees tight and your toes pointing forward. Balance only on your buttocks and no part of your spine should touch the floor. Keep your legs at an angle of 60 degrees so that your feet are higher than your head.
3. Remove your hands from the floor and stretch your arms forward, keeping them parallel to the floor and near your thighs with your palms facing each other.
4. Stay in this posture for half a minute, with normal breathing. Gradually increase the time to one minute.
5. Breathe out, lower your hands, rest your legs on the floor and relax by lying on your back.

Variation of the posture using a belt.

1. Sit in Dandasana, as above.
2. Bend your knees and bring your feet close to your buttocks. Place a belt around the balls of your feet and hold the belt with your hands close to your feet.
3. Pull up the mula bandha and raise your feet off the floor. Keep your back straight and lift your chest.
4. Carefully extend your legs without moving your hands down the belt.
5. **Beginners:** keep your knees bent and focus on keeping your back straight and staying on your sitting bones. **Intermediates:** Straighten your legs until your feet are higher than your head.
6. Stay in this posture for half a minute, with normal breathing.
7. Then breathe out, bend your knees and take your feet to the floor. Release the belt and relax by lying on your back.

Caution

Do not practise this asana if you have a cardiac condition or severe backache.

Benefits of this posture

- Stimulates the thyroid gland, increasing the body's metabolic rate
- Reduces lower backache by strengthening the spinal muscles
- Tones the abdominal muscles and organs
- Improves blood circulation in the abdomen
- Relieves indigestion and flatulence
- Tones the kidneys and reduces fat around the waistline.



How Yoga Can Change Your Mood

You may sometimes feel agitated, depressed, tired or just in a bad mood. The last thing you want to do is practice yoga. You start to think up all sorts of excuses not to do yoga. But, the amazing thing about yoga is that once you get on your mat at home or in a class you gradually start to feel better. By the end of your yoga practice you have forgotten your bad mood and you feel calmer and more relaxed about life.

There is a definition of a yogi that I like: "A yogi is one who leaves a place a little nicer than when they arrived."

Let us all strive to become yogis.