



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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STRENGTHENING SHOULDERS AND ARMS

The shoulder girdle is quite extraordinary. Designed to act as bridge between the arms and the spine, it provides both delicate strength and immense stability. If your shoulders hurt during and after your yoga practice, it's time to figure out what's going on before you do more harm than good. If your shoulders are free of trouble, don't be overconfident: Now is the time to protect them from future injury. Either way, your shoulders will thank you, and your yoga practice will be stronger.

If you have healthy shoulders you can move your arms forward, back, across the body, and in 360-degree circles. But the relatively loose joint relies on a delicate web of soft tissue to hold it together, which makes it more vulnerable to injury. The main ball-and-socket joint is also quite shallow, adding to the flexibility but putting the joint at risk. We need to build balanced strength around the shoulder joint to create stability.

Injuries can occur in the shoulder for several reasons:

- A tight or stuck scapula (shoulder blade) can occur from sitting too long or one-sided activities such as golf or tennis. The muscles surrounding the scapula can become unbalanced.
- A tight thoracic spine (upper back) can occur from lack of movement or from too much tension in the chest muscles.
- Holding your breath can create tension in the jaw, neck, chest, upper back, and between the shoulder blades. Ineffective breathing is another way to over tighten the thoracic spine.

We use our shoulders in virtually every posture, whether the arms are stretching out to the sides in Trikonasana (Triangle), reaching up in Vrksasana (Tree), bearing weight in Sirsasana (Headstand), or supporting the torso in Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand).

Of particular importance in stabilizing the shoulder are the four muscles that are collectively called the rotator cuff. They wrap deep around the joint from the back, from the front, and over the top. Stabilization of the shoulder is a complex process shared among the four muscles. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for the muscles of the rotator cuff to be under worked and therefore weak. Practicing yoga, in which you often bear weight on the arms, is a wonderful way to do this. If you come to yoga with weak rotator cuff muscles, however, it's best not to immediately put big loads on them, as you would in Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) or inversions. So if you are new to yoga or are weak in your upper body begin building strength with postures in which you bear only light weight on your arms.

Each time you take your arms from your sides up to shoulder height, the shoulder joint gets stronger. To maintain the health of your rotator cuff, it's important not only to strengthen the muscles but also to work on opening the chest. There are a wide range of yoga postures that benefit the rotator cuff, so perhaps the best yoga prescription for rotator cuff health is to maintain a well-rounded asana practice. Practiced regularly, a variety of standing postures, chest openers, arm balances, and inversions can help you protect this complex and crucial part of your anatomy.

Posture of the Month

VASISTHASANA (side plank posture)

Technique

- Perform Adho Mukha Svanasana (downward dog). Move onto the outside edge of your left foot, and put your right foot on top of the left. Now swing your right hand onto your right hip, turn your torso to the right as you do, and support the weight of your body on the outer left foot and left hand.
- Make sure that the supporting hand isn't directly below its shoulder; position the hand slightly in front of its shoulder, so the supporting arm is angled a bit, relative to the floor. Straighten the arm by firming the triceps muscle, and press the base of the index finger firmly against the floor.
- Firm the scapulas and sacrum against the back torso. Strengthen the thighs, and press through the heels toward the floor. Align your entire body into one long diagonal line from the heels to the crown.
- If you'd like you can stretch the top arm toward the ceiling, parallel to the line of the shoulders. Keep the head in a neutral position, or turn it to gaze up at the top hand.
- Stay in this position for 15 to 30 seconds. Come back to Adho Mukha Svanasana, take a few breaths, and repeat to the right side for the same length of time. Then return to Adho Mukha Svanasana for a few more breaths, and finally release into Balasana (child posture).

Contraindications and Cautions

Students with serious wrist, elbow, or shoulder injuries should avoid this posture.

Beginner's tip

Lie on your side and rest on your forearm. Bend your knees with your feet going behind you. Gently lift your hips holding for one breath. Repeat 10 times and then change sides.

Modifications and Props

In order to increase the strength and stability of this posture, it's helpful to work it with your soles pressing against a wall. Perform Adho Mukha Svanasana with your heels up on a wall, the balls of your feet on the floor. When you shift onto the outside of your left foot, press the sole against the wall. Similarly, when you stack your right foot on top of the left, press that sole to the wall. Then in the posture, push your heels actively into the wall.

Variation for Advanced Students

Come into the posture, as above. Then exhale, bend the top knee, and draw the thigh into the torso. Reach inside the bent leg and use the index and middle fingers of the top hand to grab the big toe. Secure these fingers by wrapping them with the thumb. With an inhalation, stretch the leg perpendicularly toward the ceiling. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds, then release the grip on the toe, and return the top foot to its original position. Repeat on the second side.

Benefits of this posture

- Strengthens the arms and legs
- Stretches and strengthens the wrists
- Strengthens the shoulders
- Strengthens the abdominal muscles
- Stretches the backs of the legs
- Improves sense of balance



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