

YOGA FOR KYPHOSIS

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KYPHOSIS DEFINED

Kyphosis is defined in *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* as an excessive thoracic curvature that develops in the upper back, often in association with osteoporosis.

The spinal column is the foundation of the body. The nerves that extend to all parts of our bodies branch off of the spinal cord, which is located inside the spine (Gach, 1981). In our culture people spend much of their lives with their upper bodies rounded forward as they sit at a desk or drive a car. This tendency leads to a posture where the upper back becomes rounded forward and the chest is collapsed and the head is forward; all which characterize excessive kyphosis. Though hyper-kyphosis can be hereditary, the rounding and shortening of the spine is one of the most visible signs of aging. Over time the spine degenerates and the body shortens. As the back rounds and the chest compresses the ability to draw in a normal breath becomes compromised and the flow of blood and nerve impulses to the organs is impeded (Francina, 1997). A "C"-shaped slump in the spine has even been implicated in repetitive stress syndrome, also known as carpal tunnel syndrome, as the nerves and blood vessels on the way to the hands has been affected. Yoga can help improve/correct all of these.

The breath is the most profound tool for purifying and revitalizing the body (Gach, 1981). Every cell in the body needs to breathe. When these changes take place and excessive kyphosis occurs, shallow breathing results in an oxygen deficiency. Limiting the amount of oxygen taken in contributes to health problems system-wide. A rounded back and collapsed chest also limit the flow of blood and nerve impulses to the organs. This can affect digestion and elimination, as well as, many other bodily functions. When nerves are pinched in the upper back and neck as a result of excessive kyphosis, extremities are affected and ailments like repetitive stress disorder can result.

Maintaining spinal health and flexibility is a central theme in yoga. Regular practice can slow the degeneration of the spine and help restore its strength and vitality. To keep the spine healthy and to keep the synovial fluid lubricating the spine it must be moved in all six of its possible directions: forward bending, back bending, bending side to side and twisting side to side.

Bringing yogic awareness to the client of postural habits and movement patterns used in daily life is the first step in correcting excessive kyphosis. Reminding clients not to slouch at the keyboard or desk, or while reading the paper can be useful. When driving many people slump over the steering wheel and hold it with a forceful grip that promotes excessive kyphosis. Remind students to tune into their breath at several points during the day, taking their shoulders back yet relaxed, spine straight and head erect as they breathe a full breath in a Sitting Mountain pose can help them release tension and correct posture.

A WORD OF CAUTION:

Anyone with back pain should be advised to consult a physician and ask what movements are contraindicated before practicing yoga. All asana practice should be done carefully and slowly. It is especially important for those with chronic, long-term back problems to ease into postures. They should never push their limits, instead encourage your students to accept, love and appreciate where each of their bodies are and they will naturally improve problems in their backs.

SEQUENCE 1

WARM-UP FROM (YOGA FOR WELLNESS)

Sitting comfortably either in a chair or on the floor, come into Sitting Mountain pose. Pull shoulders back, with head erect, spine straight and hands on your knees. Take a deep breath through your nose, inhaling for 5 counts and exhaling nasally for 5 counts. Repeat 3 times.

Inhale and on the exhale turn your head and shoulders gently to one side; Inhale slowly to the count of 5 back to center, exhale shoulders and head to the opposite side; Inhale back into Sitting Mountain pose. Repeat 3 times.

With shoulders stable inhale and on the exhale turn just your head to one side. Inhale to center, exhale turning head the opposite way. Inhale back to Sitting Mountain pose. Repeat 3 times.

Inhale, on the exhale turn your head one direction and turn your shoulders the other way. Inhale to center; exhale repeating the process in the opposite direction. Inhale back to Sitting Mountain pose. Repeat three times.

From Sitting Mountain pose, bring your hands into a prayer position with palms together in front of your chest. Inhale pulling shoulder blades together behind your back with arms

bent and palms facing forward. Feel your chest opening, arch your back slightly. Exhale back to starting position. Repeat 5 times.

Start from Sitting Mountain pose, inhale while lifting your arms overhead, with your palms facing each other. Stretch from the waist, up through the rib cage and right out the tips of your fingers. Drop your shoulder blades into their sockets and exhale leaning gently to one side. Inhale back to center. Exhale leaning the opposite direction. Inhale back to center. Exhale as you lower your arms to your side and gently round the spine, drop your head forward, pull in your abdominals as you come into a sitting Cat pose. Inhale back to Sitting Mountain. Repeat 3 times.

SEQUENCE 2

DOWNWARD FACING DOG WITH A CHAIR (FROM THE NEW YOGA FOR PEOPLE OVER 50)

Put a sturdy level chair against a wall. Place your hands shoulder-width apart on the front edge of the chair seat. While keeping your hand on the chair, take a giant step back until you are a full arm's length away, your heels slightly behind your hips, feet hip-width apart.

Press your hands firmly into the chair seat and come up high on your toes, lifting your bottom as high up as possible. Stay up on your toes for several breaths and as you push the chair away from you and lengthen your spinal column. Push the chair towards the wall. Stretch your fingertips as far away as possible and your buttock bones as far back as possible to lengthen your spine to the maximum. Continue pushing the chair away as you slowly lower your heels to the floor. While you press your heels firmly down, pick up all 10 toes. And spread them wide apart until you can see daylight between them! Breathe calmly and freely. Smile so that your face muscles relax.

To come out of the pose, bring your body forward toward the chair, bend one knee, and stand up, nice and tall. Sit down in the chair for a few moments if you feel light-headed or need to rest.

SEQUENCE 3

UPWARD FACING DOG WITH A CHAIR (FROM THE NEW YOGA FOR PEOPLE OVER 50)

Begin in Downward-Facing Dog with hands on the chair seat. To move into Upward-Facing Dog change the positioning of your hands slightly so that they firmly grip the edges of the chair seat.

Keeping your hands firmly gripping the seat of the chair, bring the tops of your thighs and pubic bones toward the chair. Continue firmly pressing down into the chair seat, straightening your arms, rolling your shoulders back, lifting your sternum and opening your chest. Look up by taking your head gently back, without constricting your neck.

Keep your hands gripping the chair seat as you stretch back into Downward-Facing Dog. If you feel unusual strain in your wrist, try padding the chair with a folded sticky mat. As your strength improves, repeat Upward- and Downward-Facing Dog several times. To come out of the pose bring your body forward from Downward Dog back toward the chair, bend one knee and stand up slowly. Sit down in the chair for a few moments if you feel lightheaded to need to rest.

SEQUENCE 4

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE (FROM YOGA AS MEDICINE)

This exercise requires a six- to ten-foot strap, depending on your size (in a pinch, two men's ties, knotted together, can substitute). Place the strap over your upper back and hold one end in each hand. Drape each end of the strap over its respective shoulder (do not cross the strap in front of your body), then cross the straps in the back, holding one end in each hand. The strap should be moderately tight and not kinked or twisted. Once the strap is positioned, lightly tug on each end on a downward direction. If the strap is positioned correctly, you will feel traction on the trapezius muscles in your upper back near your neck. You may also be able to sense how your shoulder blades are being pulled in toward the ribs. Walk around the room while continuing to gently pull the ends of the strap. Do you notice how different it feels to walk when you are aligned this way? Do you feel light on your feet? If so, you've just had a sneak preview of what improved posture could bring to you.

SOURCES:

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