

Yoga Poses to Stretch and Relax

By Erin Vander Weele

The practice of yoga can calm the mind and improve strength, flexibility and balance. Yoga can provide relief and recovery after a hard workout and has been found to reduce stress and alleviate pain. It is best to practice different modifications and variations of yoga poses at your own comfort and skill level. These basic poses are fundamental to a vinyasa flow sequence and are also effective on their own for a quick stretch or workout recovery.

Child's Pose (Balasana)

This resting pose relaxes the mind and body while stretching the back, hips, thighs and ankles. Child's pose lengthens the spine and can relieve lower back tension. Largely used as a resting pose during a yoga practice, it's a good restorative position for practicing breathing. It is a great place to start for those who are new to yoga. To practice the pose, sit back on your heels with knees separated and big toes touching. Bend forward from your hips and lead your forehead to the ground while stretching arms in front of you with palms down on the mat. Relax and take deep breaths as you sink into the stretch.

Downward-Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana)

Downward-facing dog is a vital part of a yoga flow practice. The pose strengthens and offers a full body stretch, primarily for the back, hamstrings and calves. It has been said this pose calms the nervous system and can help relieve stress. There are various ways to lead into this pose and a common way is to start in tabletop pose. Beginning in tabletop with hands on the mat below your shoulders, knees directly below the hips and back flat, curl your toes under, lift your knees off the mat and draw the hips upward. Take deep breaths and gradually straighten the legs. You can gently press your heels downward to stretch the calves. Equally balance weight on the hands and feet while keeping the neck aligned with the spine.

Standing Forward Bend (Uttanasana)

While stretching the hamstrings, calves and hips, standing forward bend can also help relieve stress. You can start in chair pose to strengthen and energize. On an exhale, sweep arms down and fold forward from the hips, relaxing the head. You can touch fingertips to the ground or fold the arms, touching hands to opposite elbows. Slowly rise to come out of the pose.

Standing Crescent Pose (Indudalasana)

The standing crescent pose opens the sides of the body, stretching the rib cage, arms and torso. You can begin by standing in mountain pose with arms on the side and feet together, shoulders relaxed. Raise arms over your head and bring palms together. Bend and hold on each side, forming a crescent shape.

Pigeon Pose (Kapotasana)

This is a more challenging pose and helps ease tension in the hips, making it a good recovery stretch for runners. Pigeon pose can feel intense for those with tight hip muscles, but there are multiple variations for this pose to allow for a more gentle stretch. Starting in downward-facing dog, lift the right leg up and back into a down dog split, then bring the leg forward with your knee to the mat in front of you, gently sliding your right ankle toward your left hand at an angle within your own comfort level. Your other leg will be straight on the floor. Keep your posture straight, chest up, hips squared, and weight balanced equally. Take deep breaths as you hold the pose. If you feel you can do a deeper stretch, you have the option to fold forward. To release, step back into downward-facing dog and repeat with left leg.

Corpse Pose (Savasana)

Often practiced at the end of a yoga sequence, corpse pose relaxes the mind and whole body. To help release stress and tension, the pose requires stillness and deep meditative rest for several minutes. Lying on the mat with feet wide, arms to the side and palms facing up, take deep breaths. Relax by individually focusing on releasing tension on different parts of the body. After 5-10 minutes, come out of the pose gently by rolling to the side and press your hand to the mat for support as you slowly come to a seated position.

