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## Yin yoga poses for arms and shoulders

\*Heads up: We just launched the YBC Yoga Forum, a place for health conscious people to come together and chat about everything from chaturangas to chocolates. Come join in! We'd love to connect!One of the most important lessons I learned in yoga teacher training is that everything in the body is connected. Therefore, when my neck hurts, it's usually not something in my neck, but rather something in my shoulders or upper back that's triggering it. Keeping this in mind, I've put together eight yoga poses for the neck and shoulders for those times when something in the upper body just feels off. Pose 1: For this pose you'll need some yoga blocks. Place one horizontally on the ground so the back of your head can rest on it. Place the second one vertically under the middle of the thoracic spine. Bring your feet half-way back to the pelvis and let yourself totally relax here.Pose 2: Using the yoga blocks once again, place them vertically on the mat, shoulder distance apart. Bring the elbows to the blocks and gently lower yourself down. This feels stretches the armpits and shoulders.Pose 3: Here we've got a gentle, restorative twist that's good for the upper body, especially the shoulders and arms. Place one yoga block horizontally on the mat under your face and rest your cheek. Slide the right arm under your body and out to the left. Extend the left arm forward, resting it on a block placed vertically. Breathe 5-7 breaths and then do it on the other side.Pose 4: You can place the blocks under your knees for added support as shown. Then, tilt your pelvis forward for a long spine and draw the shoulder blades toward each other. Keeping the spine long, take your left hand and gently pull your head down to the left shoulder. It shouldn't hurt at all - be very gentle! Breathe 5-7 breaths and then go to the other side.Pose 5: This pose helps to open up the shoulders and chest, and stretches the triceps. It can be difficult to do if you're very tight in any of those areas, so use a yoga strap as shown here.Pose 6: Keep your spine very long and intend not to round the upper back as you gently pull your chin toward your chest. Breathe slowly 5 - 7 breaths.Pose 7: Interlace your fingers under your chin and sit tall, elbows together in front of the chest. As you inhale, lift the elbows as high as you can while keeping the chin parallel to the ground. Reach really high and you'll feel this stretch in your shoulders and side body. Pose 8: This is part two of pose seven. As you exhale, bring the elbows out in front, head gently goes back and look up as you squeeze the elbows together. Please let me know if you have any questions about any of these poses! The shoulder is one of the most mobile and complicated joints in our body, capable of a large variety of movements. One reason that this is so, is because what we refer to as shoulder movement is really two separate movements; that of the arm and that of the scapula. The arm has 6 degrees of freedom[1] while the scapula can move in 8 directions.[2] If we were to analyse all the possible combinations we would have to look at 48 movements. We don't need to have 48 postures, fortunately, to keep our shoulders in optimum condition. There are a couple of classic positions for the arms that will work the shoulders quite nicely.Cowface ArmsFrom the basic Shoelace we can work the shoulders in several ways. First, the classical Cowface arm position: here you bring your right hand high, bend the elbow and pat yourself on the back. Bring the left hand behind your back and try to wiggle it up as high as you can. If you have the range of motion, clasp your hands; if you can not do that, use a strap or a belt and hold it with both hands.[3] If a strap is not handy, use your pony tail. Find a place where you feel a lovely stress. Now let this soak in for 2 or 3 minutes. You are externally rotating, abducting and flexing the upper arm and internally rotating, adducting and extending the lower arm. The scapulae are mostly neutral.A final variation for Cowface is placing your hands in reverse prayer, also called paschimanjali. This is a very juicy position for both shoulders at the same time. You can do paschimanjali throughout the day: when you are walking around the house, place your arms in this position - your shoulders will loosen up quickly.When you decide to come out of these postures, you will know right away if the pose worked. Your shoulders will be thanking you loudly. Come out slowly and then to release the shoulders, try pushing your hands far apart, as if you were trying to push the walls of the room apart. This is a good time to mutter, "om." Now you are ready for the other side.Often teachers will add the option of folding forward while you hold the arm position. You may try that, but if you feel that folding forward reduces your stress, either in the shoulders or in the hips, don't bother folding forward. If folding forward intensifies the stress nicely, then go for it. Remember, you can do this in many different basic Yin Yoga postures, such as Square Pose or Straddle.Eagle Arms Another variation is called Eagle Arms: here we bring the right elbow out in front of us and under the left elbow. Try to wrap the arms as tightly as you can, and see if you can bring your palms together. If you can't bring the palms together, just fake it. This is not quite Eagle Arms - eagles soar, so start to move your elbows up and away from you.[4] Notice where you are feeling this: we are now adducting the arms but now we are abducting the scapulae. This pose is a lovely antidote to the tight shoulders we develop from sitting at a computer all day. As we lift the arms we are adding flexion.If you would like to go to a deeper edge, try leaning forward and rest your elbows onto a block or bolster, or hook the elbows over the front of the knees and try to get them, over time, to the floor. Keep working to slide the arms away from you. Hold for a couple of minutes. When you are finished, sit up and open the arms really wide, creating a bit of a backbend, opening the heart. Now you are ready for the other side: make sure it is the other arm that is underneath this time.This arm position can be used even when you are not sitting; you can come onto all fours and rest your elbows on the floor, a block or even the edge of a coffee table. Once the elbows are on something, lean away from them.Stressing the ArmsWe have moved the arms in all their 6 degrees of freedom, but we have only abducted the scapulae. This next position adducts the scapulae, proving a lovely release to the front of the chest, and puts a deep stress into the arms, especially the elbow joints. We can do this arm movement while still in Shoelace, but it may be deeper to try it while in Caterpillar or even in a posture we could call the Sitting Swan. The Sitting Swan is an alternative way to work into the hips, if the full Swan is too much, or anytime a hip opening pose is not accessible. Let's use the Sitting Swan as the basic template for this arm variation.To come into the Sitting Swan, take a sitting position where your legs are straight out in front of you, lean back slightly on your hands, place your right ankle over the left knee, bend the left leg and bring the heel in towards your leg hip. Keep the right foot flexed to support the knee. As you hold for time, you may find the intensity in your right hip diminishes, if so, move the hips closer to the left foot. Now the real place we want to focus on are the arms. Slowly move the hands away from you and lean into them. Notice the stress points: you may feel this entirely in the shoulders, the elbows or the wrists. As long as you are feeling something, you are getting the benefits. Sensation is good, but don't make it sensational: when you have had enough come out. After coming out, just shake out the arms to relax them. Don't forget the other side!A deeper option may not be available while in the Sitting Swan, so try this with the legs straight out in front of you. See if you can slide the hands further behind you and bring the hands closer together. If you desire, you can drop your head back, adding extension to the neck, but remember all the neck caveats we discuss earlier. Eventually, your hands will touch; this is the juiciest version. Again, don't overstay your welcome.Footnotes:(Back to Newsletter #6) The shoulders hold a lot of tension. Yoga can help to relieve this. Here's 4 yin yoga poses for shoulders to relieve tension and improve flexibility. What is yin yoga? The term yin yoga comes from the ancient Taoist concept of yin and yang. Yang relates to the movement that creates heat in the body. Whereas, yin is about finding stillness and cooling down the body. The theory goes that we need both to come into balance and stay in peak condition. Most yin yoga poses are practised sitting or lying on the floor. The pace is slow and it's suitable for both beginners and experienced practitioners. Benefits of yin yoga Yin yoga has many benefits. It stretches and targets both the deep connective tissues between the muscles and the fascia throughout the body. The benefits include: Calming and balancing the mind and bodyReduces stress and anxietyIncreases circulationImproves flexibilityReleases fascia and improves joint mobilityBalances the internal organs and improves the flow of chi or prana When not to practice yin yoga Although there are several benefits to yin yoga, it might not be appropriate for everyone. For example, someone with hypermobility. Hypermobility is known as double-jointedness. It describes joints that stretch further than normal. It's the opposite of limited range of motion. Hypermobile joints can be easily injured and can also contribute towards muscle fatigue, chronic pain and even permanent disability. Because yin yoga's emphasis is on stretching connective tissues, it can create problems for people who are hyper-flexible. However, people with hypermobility have a couple of options when practising yin yoga. You should do poses intelligently and use props to support your body. Another instance of when not to practice yin yoga is during acute injury. Those with acute injuries should consult a doctor before starting a stretching programme to ensure sufficient recovery has taken place. The yin yoga poses for shoulders below all include recommendations for people suffering from injuries. Yin yoga poses for shoulders The poses below have been taken from Travis Eliot's A Journey into Yin Yoga. They are examples of how the poses can be done. They're there to serve as general guidance. You might be more flexible or restricted. Do your best to follow the alignment points and modify as you need to. But, if your pose looks different to the pictures, that's OK! We recently wrote a post featuring other shoulder exercises, Resistance band exercises to strengthen your shoulders and back. Reverse prayer pose Reverse Prayer Pose Suggest duration 1-3 minutes Benefits and risks The pose provides a deep stretch for the chest, shoulders, wrists and forearms. This pose should be modified or avoided if you have existing shoulder or wrist problems. Alignment points Begin in hero pose (fig. 1) or easy seated position (fig. 2).Secondly, bring both hands behind the back and join the palms together with the fingers facing upwards.Slide the hands as high up the spins as you comfortably can, keeping the palms touching.Finally, up tall and draw the shoulder blades in toward each other, finding the stretch. Keep your chin parallel to the floor. Hero pose Fig. 2 Easy Seated Pose Modifications and other options Instead of bringing the palms together, try grabbing your elbows with the opposite hands. Alternatively, make fists and press them toward each other. For an even deeper stretch, you can try leaning forward. Eagle arms pose Eagle Arms Pose Suggested duration 2-3 minutes Benefits and risks This pose also provides a great stretch for the shoulders, forearms and wrists. It also helps expand the back muscles connected to the shoulder blades. This pose should also be avoided or modified if you have an existing shoulder injury. Alignment points Firstly, begin in the shoelace (fig. 1), hero or easy seated position.Reach both arms out in front, with your palms facing upwards.Place the right arm under the left arm and then wrap the forearms around each other until your hands face each other.Sit up tall with your chin and biceps parallel to the floor.Finally, gently pull your elbows away from the chest, spreading your shoulder blades away from each other. Repeat the whole process on the other side. Fig. 1 Shoelace Pose Modifications and other options Reach both your arms out in front of you. Bend your left elbow so that the forearms and hand face the sky. Shift the left forearm in front of your face. Reach the right arm over the left arm. Finally, bend the left elbow to deepen the stretch for the outer right shoulder (fig. 2). Repeat the process on the other side. For an even deeper stretch, try leaning forward. Fig. 2 Modification of the Eagle Arms Pose Camel pose Camel Pose Suggested duration 2-3 minutes Benefits and risks This pose opens up the chest and shoulders and stretches the thighs, hip flexors and front of the body. It can be used as a back bend for students who are pregnant. We have more exercises for pregnant women in our blog, First-trimester exercise: How to do it safely and effectively. The camel pose isn't advised for those with low back pain, neck injuries, high blood pressure, heart disease or history of stroke. Modification for those with knee pain is explained below. Alignment points Firstly, kneel down, stacking your shoulders over your hips and place your hands on your hips.Next, press the shins and tops of the feet into the mat. Roll your little toes down and point the toes straight back.With the knees hip-width apart and the sitz bones over the knees, roll the inner thighs back.Place your hands on the lower back and lengthen the tailbone toward the floor.Lift the ribs as the heart rises toward the ceiling and roll your shoulders back. Press your shoulder blades toward the back ribs.Finally, Lift your gaze toward the ceiling, keeping the cervical spine in alignment with the rest of the spine. If you've got enough flexibility in the back and enough stability in the pose, you may release the hands and the heels. Modifications and other options If you suffer from knee pain, sensitivity or have experienced injury, use a folded blanket under the knees for support. For a one-armed camel pose, place your right hand on top of the right heel and reach your left arm toward the sky (fig. 1). Repeat on the other side. You can also tuck the toes under to modify. Fig. 1 Modification to the camel pose Thread-the-needle shoulder stretch Thread the Needle Shoulder Stretch pose Suggested duration 2-3 minutes Benefits and risks This pose opens up the shoulders and chest. Plus, it provides a relaxing spin and twist. Be gentle if you have a history of neck pain. Also, if you experience tingling or loss of sensation in the hands, come out of the stretch. Alignment points Begin on all fours and extend one arm towards the sky, stretching through the top chest.Secondly, lower the arm and thread it under the opposite arm, releasing the outer shoulder onto the floor.Repeat on the other side. Modifications and other options Place a blanket under the knees, shins and feet for comfort. Also, the hand positioned in front of the face can slide forward towards the top of the mat for more of a shoulder stretch in that arm (fig. 1). Fig. 1 First modification for the Thread the Needle Shoulder Stretch The hand positioned in front of the face can also reach around behind the back and either grab the inner thigh or rest on the sacrum (fig. 2). Fig. 2 Second modification for the Thread the Needle Shoulder Stretch Time needed: 25 minutes. 4 Yin Yoga Poses for Shoulders Reverse Prayer Pose Eagle Arms Pose Camel Pose Thread-the-needle Shoulder Stretch Further reading More yin yoga poses for shoulders and various parts of the body can be found in A Journey into Yin Yoga. You may might also enjoy reading about the 7 best yoga books to help you get more out of your practice. The following titles feature various yoga exercises: Yoga Anatomy, 2nd EditionYoga for Athletes





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