

## Yoga for Lower Back Pain – Part One

*Inspired by the Yoga tradition of Krishnamacharya-Desikachar*

Written by Maggie Reagh



**L**ow back pain (LBP) is a common problem affecting 80% of us at some point in our lives. One way to prevent and actually help treat common back problems is through Yoga. That said, some Yoga positions can aggravate or increase the risk of LBP. Sometimes it is not the actual Yoga posture that puts the person at risk but rather the inability of the person to get into the specific posture correctly and thus safely.

Many North Americans have poor flexibility and a lack of core strength. This increases the likelihood of doing Yoga improperly. It is important for people at risk of LBP and especially so for those recovering from LBP to be taught Yoga with extra attention to proper technique. When starting Yoga, you should also begin with postures that are easy to perform correctly.

Surprisingly, the common forward bend of everyday life is a major cause of LBP when performed incorrectly. This can lead to damage of the inter-vertebral discs and ultimately lead to an increased risk of disc herniation. Yet this movement is an integral part of many Yoga postures and when done properly is beneficial. Unfortunately, the forward bend component in Yoga poses does not always adhere to the example given by an instructor or as pictured in a book. Good hands on instruction is crucial to make sure the form is safe.

**The five most common causes of lower back pain are:**



1. **Lack of flexibility:**

***Is it hard for you to touch the floor with straight legs, squat with heels down, or sit cross-legged?***

***Do your feet turn out or in on both or one side?***

- Restricted hips movement due to tight hamstrings, quadriceps (thighs), gluteal (buttocks) and/or hip flexors (iliopsoas/rectus femoris)
- Asymmetrical movement patterns in the pelvic girdle: i.e. an asymmetric increase or decrease in range of movement in hips and lower back.
- Lower back stiffness in the actual vertebral joints and an inability move the spine in or out of forward, side, or backward bends as well as spinal rotation (twisted postures).

2. **Lack of Strength:**

***Have you been physically inactive for a while? Do you have difficulty staying in a Yoga posture for more than 3 breaths?***

- Weakness in the core and lower back: transverse (deep) abdominals as well as in the lower back muscles (multifidus and erector spinae).

3. **Poor posture:**

***Do you have sway back or hunch back?***

- Either flattened lordosis (inward curve in small of back) or exaggerated lordosis (sway back) of the lumbar spine
- Increased kyphosis (hunch back) with excessive or lack of mobility
- Forward head posturing (poking chin)

4. **Poor Biomechanics/Body Awareness:**

***Do you watch your spinal alignment when you perform day to day activities, Yoga included?***

- Poor body awareness i.e. students force their bodies into Yoga postures that are beyond their limits or do not keep a neutral spine – natural lumbar and cervical curves – when performing postures.
- Everyday activities that add to stress on lower back: e.g. prolonged slumped or twisted seated posture at computer desk or incorrect forward bending to lift objects etc.

5. **Stress:**

***Do you feel pain in your back after a stressful situation has arisen?***

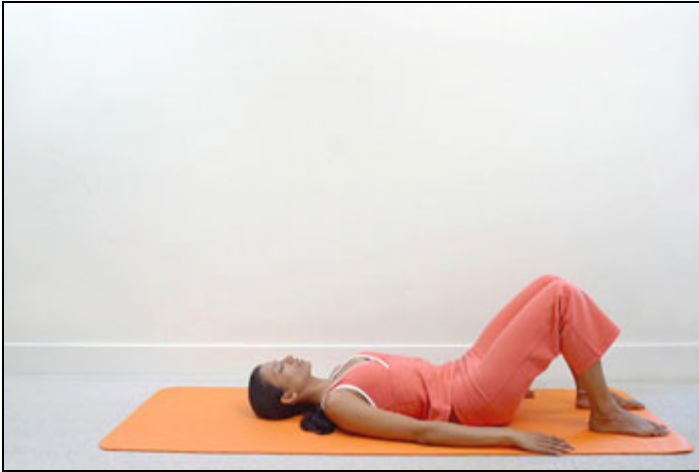
- Ineffective stress management skills

***This Practise is not designed for those in acute pain*** with neurological conditions including spinal disc involvement. ***Please consult your health practitioner and Yoga teacher*** before attempting to practice the following sequence of Yoga postures.

The ***Viniyoga approach to Yoga*** is the correct application of the many tools of Yoga based on individual needs. Therefore, for best results, find an experienced Yoga therapist to teach you a similar Yoga sequence specifically designed with your back in mind. Please note that most of the following are modifications of classical postures. ***If you experience pain during any of the following exercises, please stop immediately and consult your health practitioner.***

## This month in YUJ, Steps 1 & 2 of 19 Sequences:

### 1. Tādākamudrā: Little Pond Mudra – Breathing



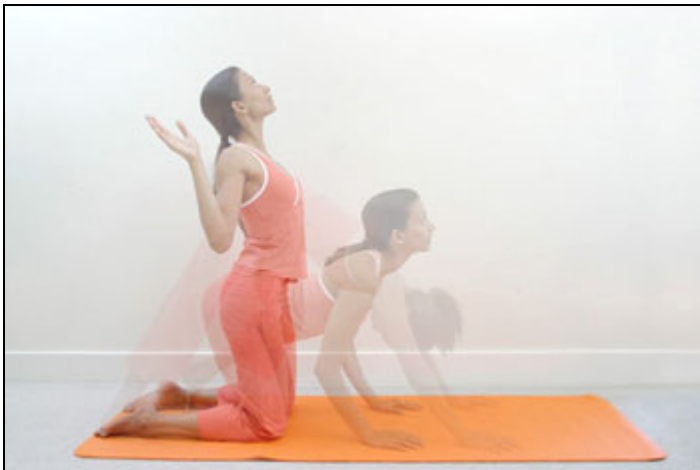
**Focus:** To teach conscious breathing technique

**Instructions:** Lie on your back with arms at sides. **On inhale:** Bring arms overhead to the floor with an expanding chest and down to the full contraction of the diaphragm. **On exhale:** Pull the pubic bone and the tailbone towards each other (mula bandha or root lock) and lower belly (below belly button) in.

**Repeat:** 6 times

**Medical Notes:** This posture promotes a subtle level of core strength work and teaches the breathing technique which works on stretching the intercostal muscles of the chest on the inhale and contracting the perineal muscles of the pelvic floor and transverse (deep) abdominals on exhale. It also promotes relaxation and subtle strength-flexibility work of the spine by stretching the front (anterior aspect) of the chest, thoracic spine, and abdominal wall.

### 2. Cakravākāsana with Adhomukha Śvānāsana Vinyāsa: Mythical Bird (“Cat”) with Downward-facing Dog Flow



**Focus:** To gently stretch the upper and lower back as well as the hamstrings.

**Instructions:**



placement)

Sit in vajrāsana (diamond posture – note: feet



**On inhale:** Open up the arms as you draw the shoulder blades together and point the elbows forward to rotate the shoulders back.

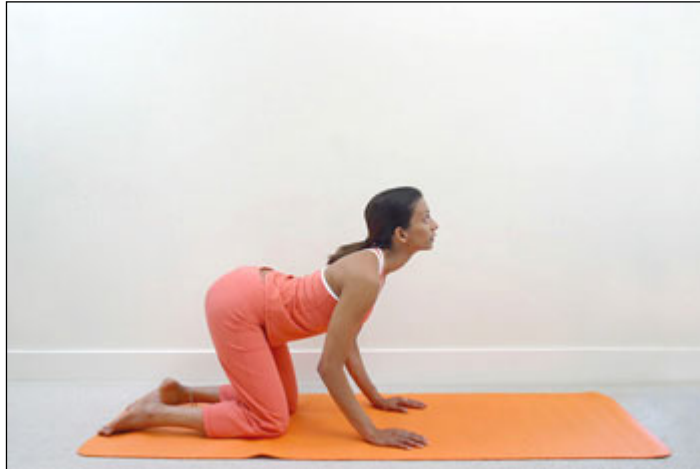
**On exhale:** drop the shoulder blades.



**On inhale:** Bring the arms overhead.



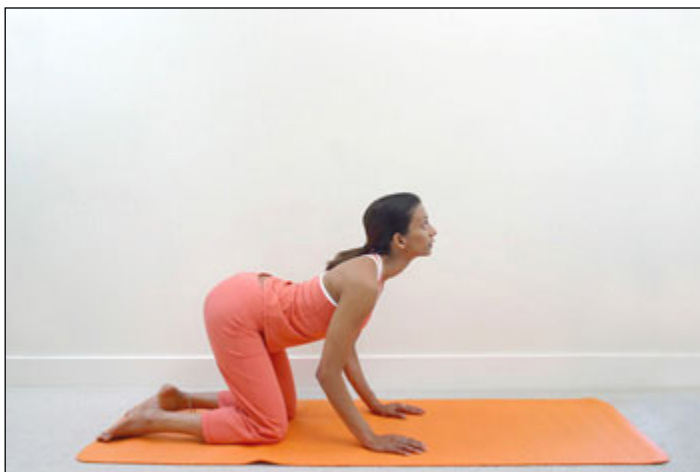
**On Exhale:** Lower into Extended Arm child's pose.



**On inhale:** to upward cat.



**On exhale:** to cat.



**On inhale:** to upward cat again.



**On exhale:** Come into downward facing dog, stretching one ankle/hamstring at a time. **Stay** there with 1-3 breaths on each leg with other leg bent.



**“Walking the dog”** .

Increase stay incrementally for each repetition of the flow.

**Repeat** the reverse, until you come back to the starting kneeling position.

**Repeat:** 2 times with dynamic stays in downward facing dog for 1-3 breathes/ankle.

**Medical Notes:** This posture gently warms up and stretches the neck, back, calves, and hamstrings while mobilizing the spine. It opens up the front chest (pectoralis) while strengthening the middle and lower trapezius muscle (upper back muscles).

Next, issue of **YUJ** – We will speak on **Uttanasana** with Maggie Reagh

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