

Beginner's Guide to Seated Chair Yoga

Getting Started

Yoga is more than just an exercise. It aims to unite the body and the mind through the poses, the breath, and meditation. You do not have to be flexible to do yoga. Anyone can participate in a yoga class. This is partly due to the fact that yoga is individual- each pose will look differently on different people. Your ability to do a pose may also vary from day to day. It is not a competition. Yoga can be a wonderful way to incorporate mindful movement and activity into your day. Before we get to the details of getting started, let's take a moment to set some general intentions:

Always treat yourself with kindness.

Do not compare yourself to others.

Meet yourself where you are today.

Only you know how you feel, so listen to yourself first.

Try to find a balance- Challenge yourself but do not force or strain.

Relax, it's just yoga!

Equipment

One of the great aspects of yoga is that you do not really need much equipment. You can even do yoga before you get out of bed in the morning. Of course for Chair Yoga, you will need:

A sturdy chair, with or without arms

A thick book, towel, or blanket to place under your feet if they do not touch the floor.

You may choose to have bare feet, regular shoes, or non skid socks.

You may place a small towel or pillow behind your low back if needed.

Water as needed.

Proper Form

Most seated chair yoga classes begin in **Mountain Pose**. This is a chance to move your body into a good alignment, check in with how you feel, and begin to become aware of your breathing. It can be very challenging to maintain this pose. It is always an option to sit back in the chair and have the support on the spine. If you are mindful with your posture and continue to engage your core muscles, you will still reap all the physical benefits.

It is much more beneficial to practice the poses with good spinal alignment than it is to simply try to get through them. Form and proper alignment is important. This will translate to your functional movement in your daily life. Remember our intention of being kind to yourself. If we are not treating ourselves well on the "mat" (or chair in this case), we will not treat ourselves well off the "mat".

However, be mindful of the fact that the poses will not look the same on everyone!

Mountain Pose

Sit in a comfortable seat of your choice. You are welcome to sit all the way back in the chair or you may choose to sit forward a few inches. Place a small towel roll in the small of your back if needed.

Knees are bent to 90 degrees and ankles are in line with the knees. Place your feet flat on the floor hip width apart and parallel. Ground down through all 4 corners of your feet. Relax the hands at your sides or on the thighs.

Elongate from the base of the spine to the top of your head. Shoulders are relaxed down and away from the ears. Broaden through the chest. Bring awareness to your abdominal muscles.

Take a few breaths here as you relax the muscles in the face and jaw.



Breathing

Pranayama is the yoga term for breathing practice. You may have also heard the term Vinyasa as it relates to yoga. In Sanskrit, vinyasa means "to link or connect". In yoga we aim to link the movement with the breath. There are many different breathing techniques in yoga. These all take lots of practice. For the purposes of getting started with chair yoga, you can just focus on linking the breath with movement and being aware of your breath. Think-inhale to open the body and exhale to compress.

For example, inhale to raise the arms up in the air and exhale to lower the arms back to the sides. It can seem complicated (and you can take a whole class just focused on the breath) but the main points are to be aware of your breathing, do not hold your breath, aim to take nice full breaths from the belly (not the chest), and always stop if you are short of breath. If you have a chronic respiratory or cardiovascular condition, some breathing techniques may not be right for you. Always consult with your healthcare provider if you have any concerns. Above all, the breath always comes first.

Modifications

If you find yourself taking a yoga class and there is no mention of modifications- this may not be the right class to be in. As I mentioned before, every pose will look differently on different people. Always do what is right for you. There are many health conditions that may require you to limit your range of motion in certain areas. For example, if you have osteoporosis it is recommended that you avoid bending at the waist, twisting the torso to an extreme, and resisted twisting. Again, always check with your doctor if you have any concerns. Here are few ways you can modify:

- Always go at your own pace.
- Eliminate poses or postures that cause pain/discomfort or that compromise other body parts.
- If a pose consists of moving two limbs, you can do one at a time.
- Sit back in your chair to support your spine.
- If you cannot do a pose, just sit tall with a long spine and focus on breathing- that is good enough.
- The breath always comes first.

Final Thoughts

Yoga can be a great way to get the movement we need in our daily lives. The mental benefits are numerous as well. It can promote relaxation, help reduce stress, and improve our mental clarity. As with any exercise, be aware of any precautions you may have. If you are able, try taking a class. There are many options available at home as well. Even learning a few poses and trying them daily for a few minutes will be valuable.

Namaste