

# YOGA DON'TS — AND DO'S

**By JEANNINE STEIN** >>> Yoga is more than just striking a pose. But *how* you strike that pose is nonetheless critical.

Maintaining correct form is essential not only for building a solid yoga practice but also because improperly doing the same yoga poses repeatedly — even the most basic ones — can lead to strains, sprains and chronic aches.

Yet it's easy to go awry. Many popular classes are overcrowded, making it difficult for teachers to correct every swayed back and hunched shoulder. Even in smaller groups, a misaligned leg can easily go unnoticed. And then there's the fact that less experienced students sometimes try to emulate more practiced ones, over-stretching muscles or getting joints out of alignment in the process.

As for doing yoga only at home with no supervision? That can be a recipe for disaster.

"Yoga is really about getting to know your body," says Christine Burke (pictured above), co-owner and director of Liberation Yoga in Los Angeles. "A lot of us don't have that awareness of what something is supposed to feel like when it's right."

That can make going from bad form to good form sometimes feel uncomfortable, she says. Occasionally the body must get used to the new position before the resulting aches and pains go away.

We talked to a few yoga teachers about the most common mistakes students make while doing basic poses. They explain the potential harm and offer easy ways to correct improper form. **For full instructions, see E6 and E7.**

## Decrease soreness by using proper technique in yoga positions

Mistakes vary, so does advice. Here's some from:

**Candace Morano** | New York-based yoga instructor and educational kinesiologist

**SEATED POSE WITH PRANAYAMA:** Knees are bent, with one leg placed over or in front of the other. The pose is done with pranayama, or breath control.

• **Don't:** Sit with the shoulders rounded forward, which collapses the area around the rib cage. That can affect the ability of the lungs to hold a lot of oxygen and to get air deeper into the lungs. Think of a bent straw — it doesn't move liquid as well.

• **Do:** Feel the front of the body lengthening — and the sides too, from waistline to armpits and from lower back to skull as you breathe in. Breathing is like pouring water into a glass; the body is a container, and the breath goes into that cylinder. In some exercise classes, the abdominal muscles are strengthened by doing a crunching motion. But in yoga, the abdominal muscles are strengthened by lengthening them. This also takes pressure off the back muscles.

**STANDING FORWARD BEND** (also called a standing forward fold): Feet are together as the torso and head bend forward toward the legs.

• **Don't:** Hyperextend the knees. That puts pressure on the hamstrings (the muscles at the back of the thigh) and the Achilles tendon. There's a connection from the Achilles all the way up to the spine, so hyperextending almost puts a lock on the energy flow. This can lead to more tightness in the lower back and strain on the knee joints.

• **Do:** Bend the knees a little bit. This helps draw the hips forward over the ankles. Sometimes that will make people feel as if they're falling forward, but it also

engages the muscles in the front of the thigh, in turn lengthening the front of the thigh muscle (the quadriceps) and then the hamstrings. This creates more of a balance.

**WARRIOR III:** While standing on one leg, the torso and arms extend forward; the other leg elevates and extends backward.

• **Don't:** Forget about the rear of the pose. People

often only think of what's ahead of them, so they tend to reach and drop their chest forward and forget to extend strongly through that back leg. Also, sometimes people will twist their hip up as they lift the leg.

• **Do:** Flex the back foot, which engages the muscles of the back leg. Imagine pressing a foot against a wall, with energy going in both directions. To keep the hips square, use the inner thigh muscles in the lifted leg. Otherwise, when the hip

is turned up or twisted, the inner thigh might not be used, putting pressure on the standing leg and hip. This is a hard pose for people sometimes because it requires balance; hold on to a chair or wall if necessary.

**UPWARD-FACING DOG:** From a prone position, the chest and pelvis rise off the floor while the tops of the feet stay on the floor. Arms support the raised torso and are perpendicular to the ground.

• **Don't:** Tense the neck or the muscles in the upper back and shoulders, such as the deltoids and upper trapezius. Some people do this when they carry heavy bags, so they do it in yoga out of habit. Over time that can lead to a sore neck and may cause shoulder or rotator cuff injuries.

• **Do:** Bend the elbows a little bit and use the back muscles (rhomboids, lower and middle trapezius) and the supraspinatus (one of four rotator cuff muscles) to

lift, instead of the neck and shoulder muscles. Also, keeping the hips on the ground instead of slightly raising them will shift focus to the upper body, keeping the shoulders relaxed and drawing them up and back. Keep the chest open as the body is lowered — the shoulders shouldn't feel a lot of pressure, rather they should feel as if they're easing into a hammock.

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