

Free Your Neck

Find lasting relief from neck and upper back pain with alignment awareness on and off the mat. By Carol Krucoff, E-RYT 500

Like many yoga teachers, I often begin my classes by asking students if there are particular places in their bodies where they feel tension, tightness, or discomfort that they'd like our session to address. The single most common reply is "neck and shoulders." In fact, neck pain and its associated disorders are much more common than previously believed, according to a task force established by the World Health Organization (WHO). Most people will suffer from neck pain at some point in their lives, the task force reported in the journal *Spine* in 2008, with some evidence indicating that 10 to 20 percent of adults suffer from chronic or persistent neck pain.



While neck pain sometimes results from trauma—such as an injury from playing sports or whiplash from a car accident—by far the most common cause is stress on muscles and ligaments stemming from poor postural habits, typically related to our computerized, stressful, sedentary lifestyle. One of the most widespread postural problems is forward head posture, a misaligned relationship between the head and the shoulder girdle, where the head protrudes in front of the shoulders and the upper back rounds. This causes the muscles of the neck, shoulders, upper back, and chest to alter their length and efficiency as they struggle to counterbalance the weight of the heavy

head against the pull of gravity—with the muscles in the neck and front body becoming tight and short and those in the mid back and the back of the shoulders becoming weak and overstretched.

Typically the muscles complaining in pain in forward head posture are the overworked posterior muscles of the neck, which serve to extend, rotate, and laterally bend the head. These include the suboccipital muscles at the base of the skull; the deep neck extensors, located alongside the cervical vertebral column; and the upper trapezius, which extends down from the base of the skull and the cervical vertebrae, and also serves to move the scapulae (shoulder blades).

Prolonged postural distortion pulls the scapulae up toward the ears and causes the muscles in the front of the neck and chest—including the sternocleidomastoids, anterior and medial scalenes, and pectoralis major and minor—to tighten and shorten, drawing the head even farther forward and rounding the shoulders. As the chest collapses, the chin juts out to keep the gaze forward, creating further compression in the neck.

Forward head posture can have a number of adverse effects throughout the body. The shortening of muscles in the front of the chest puts pressure on nerves and blood vessels in the arms, which can increase the risk of repetitive stress injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome. The elevation and forward movement of the scapula, combined with a weakening of the lower trapezius and supraspinatus, can compromise the shoulder joint, leading to pain and inflammation in the rotator cuff. Forward head posture can also compromise your lower back, because the curve in your lumbar spine may change to offset the shift in your cervical spine. In addition, continual “slumping” compresses the lungs and internal organs, so it’s not surprising that this rounded posture can interfere with proper breathing, circulation, and digestion. Healthy diaphragmatic breathing is difficult if you’re in a slumped position, and shallow “chest breathing” can lead to or exacerbate neck pain because it uses accessory respiratory muscles, especially those around the neck, to lift the chest, which creates compression on the cervical spine.

To determine whether you have forward head posture, try a simple self-test: stand with your back and heels against a wall; if the back of your head doesn’t easily touch the wall, you may have this misalignment and be at increased risk for neck pain. The WHO task force reported that for most people struggling with neck pain, the best strategy is self-care. That’s where yoga comes in. Yoga asks us to pay attention to the many factors that can influence neck and shoulder pain—including our postural habits, body mechanics, thoughts, and emotions—and move with diligence and compassion in the direction of health.

For lasting relief of neck and shoulder pain, it's essential to bring your postural awareness and yoga practice into daily life. The following set of postures includes three chair-based yoga practices that you can weave into your workday to cultivate proper sitting posture and enhance circulation in the neck, shoulders, and supporting muscles. Two gentle on-the-floor backbends help counteract the effects of forward head posture on the muscles of the back, neck, shoulders, and chest.

In a Chair

Seated Mountain Pose



In this well-aligned sitting posture, the head is balanced directly over the shoulder girdle, relieving supporting muscles of the extra burden of holding it up against gravity. Sit tall, with your feet planted firmly on the ground and your sit bones dropping down into the seat of the chair. From this place of grounding, extend the crown of your head up toward the sky, lengthening your spine. Soften your shoulders away from your ears and rest your hands on your thighs. Be sure your chin is parallel to the ground, neither poking up nor tucked in. Imagine that you have a headlight in the center of your chest at your sternum, and shine that light directly forward. Relax your face. With a soft gaze and smiling eyes, look toward the horizon. You might visualize yourself

resting your head back against a supportive headrest. If someone looked at you from the side, they'd see your ear directly over your shoulder, and your shoulder directly over your hip.

Angel Wings with Circles

Geared toward enhancing circulation in the shoulders and upper back, this posture helps free the scapulae, which are suspended by a network of muscles and ligaments that attach to the neck and upper spine.

From seated mountain pose, extend your arms forward; then bend your elbows and place your fingertips on your shoulders. On an inhalation, open your elbows out to the sides as you draw your shoulder blades together in the back of your body; imagine that you have a nut on your spine and your shoulder blades are moving together like a nutcracker to squeeze it. On an exhalation, bring your elbows forward and together, as you feel your shoulder blades sliding apart in back of your body. Continue for 3 to 6 breaths.

Then, keeping your fingers resting lightly on your shoulders, imagine that your elbows are felt-tipped markers, and draw large ovals in the air with them. Keep the breath slow and easy as you circle in one direction for 3 to 5 breaths and then reverse direction for 3 to 5 more breaths.



Ear to Shoulder



This posture helps stretch muscles that are involved in rotating and tilting your head, including the scalenes and upper trapezius, which often become extremely painful and sore in people who sit at a desk for long periods.

From seated mountain pose, reach your arms behind you and clasp your elbows with your opposite hands. Then release your right hand and place it on your right thigh, with your left hand holding your right arm just above the inside of the elbow. Inhale as you lengthen the crown of your head toward the sky; then exhale and release your right ear down toward your right shoulder, trying not to lift the shoulder toward the ear. Drop your left shoulder down and breathe into the left side of your neck. Stay here for several breaths, then exhale and gently rotate your head so that your nose moves toward your right shoulder.

Inhale and rotate your head the other way so that your nose moves toward the sky.



Continue for a few breaths, synchronizing your movement with your breath. Then relax, release your arms, and let your head float back over the shoulder girdle, crown lifting to the sky. Repeat on the other side.

On The Floor

Baby Cobra



Unlike other variations of bhujangasana, in which the arms can help raise the back, this version requires the back muscles to do all the work. As a result, this pose helps strengthen many of the muscles that tend to be weakened and stretched by forward head position, including the middle and lower trapezius, latissimus dorsi, rhomboids, and serratus posterior.

Lying on your belly, bring your arms down by your sides, palms facing down, and your chin or your forehead to the floor (you can place a small folded towel under your forehead if you like). Root down through your pubic bone, and press your legs and the tops of your feet down into the earth, lengthening back through your feet. Find your breath. On an inhalation, lift your head, neck, shoulders, and upper back as high as you comfortably can, keeping the hands on the floor. The goal is to create a slight backbend in the upper spine without stressing the low back. On an exhalation, relax everything back down. Continue with this practice, inhaling up and exhaling down for 3 to 6 breaths. For an extra challenge, stay in the lifted pose for several slow, deep breath cycles. Be sure to keep your neck long so that you're not just cranking your neck up and down but using your back muscles to lift the back and shoulders; imagine that you have an eye in the back of your neck, and try to keep that imaginary eye wide open.

Arm Variation: Clasp your hands behind your back, keeping the elbows soft. On an inhalation—as you lift your back, shoulders, and head—also lift your clasped hands up away from the tailbone and extend your arms back. Allow this action to help draw the shoulders back, and invite the arms to straighten without locking the elbows.



Neck Turn Variation: Each time you relax down on an exhalation, turn your head to one side, being sure to alternate sides.

Restorative Backbend



This pose can be particularly soothing after a day behind the desk since it stretches the muscles in the front of the shoulders and chest that tend to get short and tight in forward head posture—particularly the front of the deltoids, subclavius, and pectoralis major and minor.

Place a block underneath one end of a bolster so that the bolster rests at a slant. Sitting on the floor with bent knees, bring your sacrum against the lower portion of the bolster and ease yourself back into a comfortable reclining position, arms resting at your sides, palms up. Feel free to cover your eyes with a cloth or a small pillow and use additional blankets, if necessary, to support your head. Set a timer for 5 to 15 minutes, then turn your attention inward, allowing your breath and gravity to help the pose deepen and unfold.

Remember, good posture is not just something reserved for yoga class; it can offer profound healing when practiced off the mat, too. Try integrating yoga into your daily life by noticing what's happening physically, energetically, mentally, and emotionally throughout your day. While you're at your desk, plan to take a 30-second break every hour to check your posture and watch your breath. After a restroom break, try a few rounds of angel wings and ear-to-shoulder stretches. With awareness and practice, you can find profound relief from neck and shoulder pain, cultivating lasting balance.

Sources:

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