

- » Moving for health
- » Using a chair rather than a mat
- » Noting the benefits of Chair Yoga
- » Checking out a couple of simple Chair Yoga exercises

## Chapter **1**

# Checking Out Chair Yoga

**G**etting up and down off the floor or a Yoga mat can be a challenge for some people. But no one should be left off the Yoga bandwagon.



REMEMBER

For any number of reasons, you may choose to practice Yoga while sitting in a chair. Chair Yoga doesn't require that up-and-down flow you may find in other Yoga classes. You can remain in a seated position where you feel more stable — even safer — while still reaping some of Yoga's most significant benefits:

- » More flexibility
- » Increased strength
- » Better balance
- » Improved circulation
- » Decreased anxiety and stress
- » Reduced pain
- » Better sleep
- » Greater willpower

These benefits have been acknowledged over the years by not only Yoga teachers and students but also Western medicine itself.



REMEMBER

Chair Yoga is just one approach or technique, but it may in fact be the smartest one. The key to making your movements truly Yogic is to synchronize them with your breath. That coordination keeps you relaxed and allows your body to benefit from the power of simple movements.

## Harnessing the Power of Simple Movements

Sitting in front of a screen or in a line of slow-moving commuter traffic can render you relatively motionless for hours at a time. In fact, health practitioners often warn about how being sedentary, especially sitting too much, is actually almost the same threat to good health as smoking is.



TIP

Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists alike talk about how much you can gain from the simplest of movements. Simple and safe movements can

- » Build muscle strength
- » Increase flexibility
- » Increase bone density (in some practitioners)
- » Lubricate your joints
- » Improve your will power
- » Decrease anxiety and stress
- » Exercise your heart and lungs

You can read more about some of these benefits in the following section.

The ultimate objective is to avoid inactivity but, at the same time, proceed both slowly and thoughtfully. That's where Chair Yoga comes in. Although you can move in many ways, Chair Yoga may be both the perfect and the safest activity. It's also a great way to supplement other aerobic and strength training exercises.

If you want to hang on to a Yoga practice but find your body is making new demands, consider Chair Yoga. If you're new to Yoga and maybe feel too old or too inflexible, this approach may be an ideal entry point.



REMEMBER

At the end of the day, Yoga — even Chair Yoga — needs to make you feel better. Listen to your body, don't allow yourself to endure pain, and most of all, have fun!

# When a Yoga Mat Just Doesn't Work

The chair has a long history in Yoga. It's a traditional prop, often used for safety and support in the pursuit of the classic form of a pose. Great Yoga masters like B.K.S. Iyengar employed the chair by using innovative methods to help students move into otherwise difficult postures.

But Chair Yoga is something different. Popularized in the USA by Lakshmi Voelker back in the 1980s, it's more about making Yoga accessible to everyone. It's about finding ways for Yoga to accommodate the particular needs of the practitioner rather than finding ways for the practitioner to adapt to a pose. Chair Yoga is about practicing in a way that serves your fitness goals and makes you want to come back again and again.

## Seniors need Yoga, too

Without a doubt, many senior centers have mat Yoga classes that are well attended by people in their '60s, '70s, and even '80s. These people use their mats in the traditional way, which means they get up and down off the floor at various points throughout the class. Some seniors, however, just can't do that. Chair Yoga provides an alternative for almost anyone.



REMEMBER

Your body changes as you get older, and you may lose certain capabilities. Even in an average Yoga class, practitioners can't do the things they did when they were younger — at least not without the risk of getting injured.

## Deskbound employees

Whether they're self-imposed or handed down by an employer, productivity demands can keep you at a desk for too many hours at a time. (Of course, many people willingly sit in front of their computers for extended periods of time, oblivious to the clock and the rest of the world around them.)

Chair Yoga provides a way to counteract all the negative aspects of sitting at a desk for long periods of time and receive the benefits of thoughtful movements without leaving the desk chair.

## Leaving on a jet plane

If you find yourself sitting for long periods of time on an airplane, watching an in-flight movie or even splurging on a cocktail often just isn't enough to help you relax or bring the circulation back into your limbs. And space is always an issue on a plane.

These are some of the challenges faced by the frequent traveler. Chair Yoga can certainly offer relief to the tight and tense traveler

## Yoga for expecting moms



WARNING

All expecting mothers need to talk with their obstetricians about doing exercise. Knowing the things you should look out for or avoid entirely is critical.

This book doesn't deal specifically with prenatal Yoga. Chair Yoga, however, does offer the expecting mother some distinct advantages. Specifically, using the chair as a prop can help support body weight as well as bring the stability of the floor up higher.

The goal, of course, is to avoid any kind of pressure on the abdomen (including certain kinds of twisting), so listen to your body and your doctor when it comes to doing any physical activity — even Chair Yoga. Then, select the poses and movements you think would be beneficial.

The good news is that expecting mothers can certainly practice both breathwork and meditation from the comfort of their chairs. Both can reduce or eliminate stress and pain in your mind and your body.

## Practicing yoga when you have limited mobility

Even people who have athletic Yoga practices find their abilities are constrained or deactivated from time to time. This typically occurs as the result of injury or illness. Chair Yoga is often a way for these people to keep practicing even though their range of motion is temporarily limited.

If this is you, be mindful of any warnings that may come from your doctor. But also remember that Chair Yoga is almost always a better alternative to complete immobility. A thoughtful practitioner can keep some parts of their body limber while allowing other parts to heal.

# Enjoying the Benefits of Yoga

If you look at Yoga as more of a healing activity rather than simply a process of bringing your body into super-flexible poses, then the mental and physical benefits derived from a Yoga practice are definitely more important than how it may “look.”

As we note earlier in the chapter, even Western medicine recognizes the power of Yoga, and Chair Yoga offers most of the same benefits.

## Moving feels good

“Sitting is the new smoking” has almost reached the status of being a cliché, but it still resonates loudly. The impact of too much sitting — of too much inactivity — takes a toll on both your body and your spirit. Clearly, moving makes you feel better.

The implication here is pretty straightforward. If you’re currently not moving around enough, adding Chair Yoga as a regular routine will yield returns. You may not readily see them initially, but they’ll ultimately become wonderfully apparent.

## Working the joints

Just by doing some of the most basic movements in Chair Yoga, you keep your joints mobile and well lubricated. The key is to not overdo it, so always listen to what your body’s saying and stop moving when it’s time.

Anyone can benefit from good joint health, but if you happen to have arthritis, you may discover some particular relief associated with certain movements. Some arthritic pain, for example, comes from joint stiffness, so movements that reinforce mobility and range-of-motion can help. Check out Part 2 for Chair Yoga movements that target the joints.

## Stretching and strengthening the muscles

In general, Yoga contributes to muscle health in many ways. By adding Chair Yoga to your routine (or using Chair Yoga to continue your already established Yoga practice) you may be building muscle, maintaining and expanding your flexibility, and even improving your balance as you strengthen the muscles responsible for it.

Although not every Yoga movement is intended to build muscle, some movements and poses do achieve that. Perhaps you hold a pose to build strength or perform several repetitions (it’s amazing how even the simplest movement can be challenging after a few reps).

## Building some bone

Research tends to suggest that Yoga can increase bone density. This not only is important for anyone wanting healthy bones but also has compelling implications for those with osteoporosis-related diseases or those trying to prevent those types of conditions. (Loren Fishman, MD, who wrote the Foreword to this book, has done some extensive work on this subject.)



REMEMBER

Researchers don't know yet whether Chair Yoga automatically increases bone density; however, movements that involve using body weight to build muscle, improve circulation, or even create a better attitude may ultimately help build healthier bones.

## Relieving stress and anxiety

Stress just seems to be a given. Whether it's from work, a family situation, or something else, you can probably point to any number of things that bring stress or anxiety into your life. As of this writing, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic certainly has brought a degree of anxiety into everyone's life.

Chair Yoga offers enough gentle movement that it actually counteracts the impacts of stress. Even if you practice for only for 15 minutes, if you're focusing your attention on some movement or pose, your mind forgets (for a while, anyway) anything that's causing you stress or worry.



TIP

In addition to helping you stay stretched out and mobile, Chair Yoga can also reduce tension through breathing exercises and meditation — two extremely beneficial activities you can do in your chair just about anywhere.

## Giving Chair Yoga a Try

Try the following movements while using any chair — though choosing a chair without wheels or a swivel function is highly recommended in order to prevent the chair from unwanted movement. The purpose of introducing a couple of routines in Chapter 1 is to show you just how easily you can do Chair Yoga almost anywhere and how it often uses simple movements that ultimately give you a lot of bang for your buck.

### Cross/crawl patterning

The cross/crawl patterning routine may seem on the surface to be a very simple movement — and it probably is. Yet applying this concept to fitness training is a

very old approach. It begins to stretch out some of the muscles in your shoulders and hips and also moves and lubricates some of the joints.

In addition, cross/crawl patterning not only requires that opposite sides of your body work in coordination but also makes similar demands on your mind. The right and left hemispheres of the brain have to effectively communicate with one another.

In the following routine, we've adapted the classic cross/crawl patterning to the chair:

**1. Find a chair and have a seat.**

This chair may be one you use on an ongoing basis, so selecting something without arms will give you more room.

**2. Sit upright, being mindful of your posture; your arms can hang straight at your side (see Figure 1-1).**

Even in the chair, you can focus on maintaining good posture. Doing so positions your lungs and diaphragm to function more freely. Think about lining up your ears right above your shoulders and keeping your shoulders directly above your hips. Your feet should be flat on the ground.



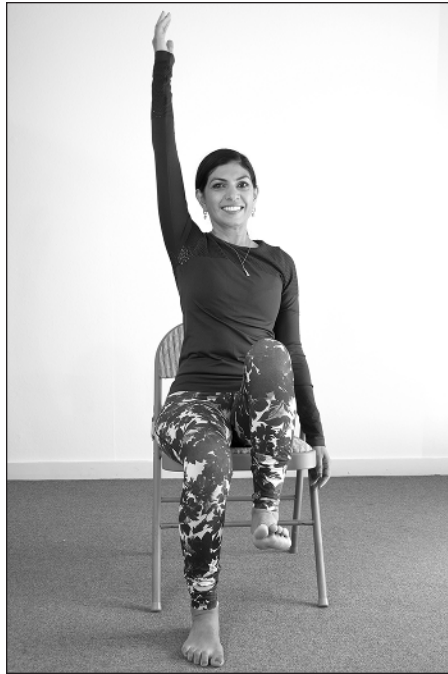
**FIGURE 1-1:**  
Sitting with good posture.

3. On an inhale, lift your right knee upward toward your chest while raising your left hand above your head with a straight arm (see Figure 1-2).



**FIGURE 1-2:**  
Lifting your arm  
and leg.

4. Exhale as you lower both your knee and your hand back to the starting position in Step 2.
5. On an inhale, lift your left knee upward toward your chest while raising your right hand above your head with a straight arm (see Figure 1-3).
6. Exhale as you lower both your knee and your hand back to the starting position in Step 2.
7. Repeat Steps 2 through 6 five more times, moving with your breath.



**FIGURE 1-3:**  
Doing the  
other side.

## Seated rejuvenation sequence

This flowing sequence is a variation of the Rejuvenation Sequence created by coauthor Larry Payne for Prime of Life Yoga. It's essentially a type of *sun salutation*, a moving sequence traditionally done in the morning, perhaps as part of a morning ritual. From a more modern perspective, this routine is a great way to warm up your entire body before continuing on with your practice.

1. Sit upright in your chair and open your legs to about hip width.
2. Let your arms hang straight down at your sides.
3. As you inhale, sweep your straight arms out to the side and bring them over your head with your palms facing (see Figure 1-4).
4. As you exhale, bring your straight arms down on the outside of your legs and fold over, allowing your head to drop between your legs (see Figure 1-5).



TIP

If you have any issues that dropping your head may exacerbate, only bend down halfway, keeping your hands on your thighs.

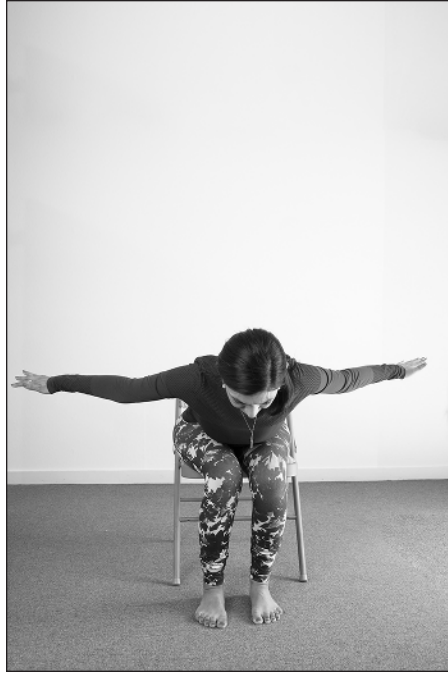


**FIGURE 1-4:**  
Reaching up.



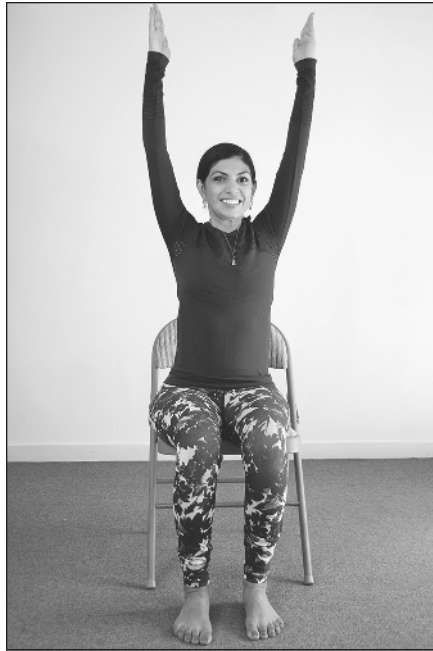
**FIGURE 1-5:**  
Folding forward.

5. As you inhale, raise your torso halfway up so your back is flat and parallel to the ground and spread your arms straight out to the sides (see Figure 1-6).

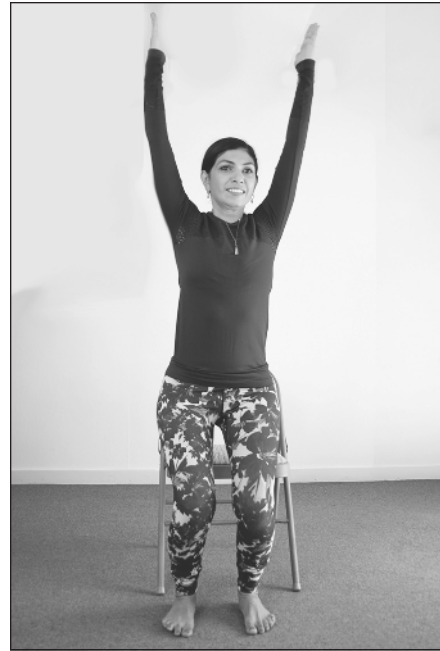


**FIGURE 1-6:**  
Halfway up.

6. On an exhale, drop your head and arms back to the forward fold as in Step 4.
7. On an inhale, reach up as you come into a squat just off of your chair (see Figure 1-7b).  
Alternatively, you can stay seated as you reach up, pressing your feet into the ground as shown in Figure 1-7a.
8. On an exhale, come back to the starting position from Step 2, sitting tall in your seat with your arms dropped to the side.
9. Repeat Steps 1 through 8 four to six times.



**FIGURE 1-7:**  
Seated or in a  
squat.



## CHERISH THE CHAIR

The great Yoga master, B.K.S. Iyengar, is famous for using props when teaching Yoga — and Iyengar Yoga uses chairs in very creative ways. Chairs often provide support to practitioners who need help getting into more demanding postures.

Co-author Larry Payne is intimately aware of this style of Yoga because he studied with Iyengar while in India. He recalls that, much to the chagrin of many local students, Iyengar was sometimes referred to as “the furniture Yogi” because of his use of so many different props.

But don't think Iyengar was offering some watered-down version of Yoga — even if he did allow his students to use props. Iyengar Yoga is, in fact, extremely demanding, usually striving toward the classic pose but sometimes using a chair to not only get there but also stay there longer.

Of course, the Chair Yoga described in this book is much more accessible. You should be able to perform some version of these postures and movements regardless of your physical challenges, age, flexibility, or experience. Still, it's worth noting that long before a chair was used to make Yoga more accessible to anyone, it was no stranger to a Yoga studio — and any Yoga student should welcome the sight of a chair.