

**Body Mind Yoga
Information Sheet**

Abdominal Strengthening

Strengthening the abdominal muscles is useful for improving posture and reducing back pain, since strong abdominal muscles provide a stable base for the spine and take pressure off the lower back and neck muscles.

When doing the exercises, it's best not to do too much to begin with, but rather to build up strength and tone gradually. Never push into any pain. If you experience lower back pain, be very careful, and only do the easy exercises and options.

Be aware of your breath as much as possible and where you can coordinate the breath with the movement. As a general rule, when you breathe out you should be tightening your abdominals and relaxing as you breathe in. And when you tighten the abdominals you always pull the tummy in (rather than push the tummy out) so when in the supine position, you have a sense of flattening the lower back. For some of the more advanced exercises you may keep the abdominal muscles tight and hold as you breathe. In this case you will need to breathe more in the chest and the breath will be shallower and faster than we would encourage for normal yoga exercises.

LYING DOWN ON THE BACK

- 1. Warm ups for the neck:** Have both hands behind head, with elbows pointing toward ceiling. Breathe out and use the hands to roll the head forwards and up. Inhale and rest the head down...go slowly and gently...Then lift the head towards the left foot and then the right foot. Alternate the movement a few times...rest head on the floor and take the hands out from underneath...roll the head slowly from side to side
- 2. Legs in semi supine** (knees bent, feet flat on the floor and about hip width and a half apart).

3. **Opposite elbow to knee:** Hands behind head again. Breathe out, press your lower back to the floor (by pulling your belly in) and roll the head up. Inhale down...do that a few more times...then as the head comes up lift one foot off the floor and direct your opposite elbow to that knee (still consciously pulling the belly in). Go from side to side...once this becomes easy, instead of putting the feet down each time you could keep the tummy tight and the lower back to the floor and slowly piston the legs (so one knee bends over the chest as the other leg straightens out in front of you). You can either keep taking the opposite elbow to the knee or it might be more comfortable to keep the head still, or even rest the head on the floor if you have neck problems...see if you can keep the pelvis really stable (you could imagine balancing a teacup on the belly). This will strengthen the deep abdominals
4. **Rest:** Take a few deep breaths down into the belly.....
5. **Circle knees:** Have knees up above chest and use the hand on top of the knees to slowly circle them. See if you can make a circular impression on the floor with your lower back...go both directions. When you do anything strong with the abdominals, it can strain the lower back, so it's good to frequently stretch the lower back out. Circling the knees is one way of doing this.
6. **From semi supine:** Take knees slowly side to side a few times...
7. **Sciatic release:** right hand under the right knee and left hand behind the head. Breathe out and roll the head up at the same time you semi straighten the right leg. Inhale, rest the head and bend the knee...maybe next time the leg straightens a little bit more...swap sides...
8. **Leg lifts:** Still from semi supine, but have your feet close together. You could slide your hands underneath your hips and buttocks, palms downward; in a position that supports you. Breathe out and lift both feet off the floor and slowly straighten your legs up toward the ceiling as you tighten your tummy muscles inward. Inhale as you bend the knees and put the feet down. If your neck is fine you could tuck the chin in and lift the head up at the same time...when that's easy and you don't have a lower back problem, then keep the legs straight for the whole movement.
9. **Knees above chest:** Wrap arms around knees and rock gently from side to side.....(again to release any tension in the lower back).

10. Table top position: Have the legs in table top position (lower legs parallel to the floor and upper legs perpendicular and knees at right angles). Start with the arms resting on floor above head, and as you breathe out float them down, tuck the chin in and roll the head up and reach forward with hands (arms parallel to the floor). Inhale back up above head...when this is easy you can begin to straighten the legs out as the hands reach forward (so the legs are at an approx 60 degree angle).

11. Knees above chest: Use the hands to gently bounce the knees into the chest.

LYING ON THE FRONT

12. Sphinx: Lie on your front, resting up on the elbows and forearms. Breathe out as you tuck your chin in toward your chest and roll your head down as you tighten the tummy muscles in and let the pelvis lift off the floor; breathe in back up. If that's easy, when you breathe out and lift the pelvis you could also lift the knees off the floor so you come into the plank position (keep your buttocks down).

13. Locust: Lie on the front with hands tucked under the hips for support. Ideally position the head on straight and resting on the forehead. Or have the head wherever is comfortable for your neck and lift first one leg up a few inches, putting it down and then lift the other leg...when that's easy do both legs together.

LYING ON THE BACK

14. Rolling onto your back and circling your knees over the chest.

15. Taking a rest on your back, either legs long or semi supine. Breathe in and expanding the belly; breathe out and relaxing your whole body...1-5 minutes.