

# COMPUTER ASANA

*By Richard Rosen*

## INTRODUCTION

If you're like most people nowadays, you probably spend a good portion of your waking hours sitting, mainly at your desk at work, but also driving in your car, at home reading or watching TV. But in fact humans aren't well adapted to spend long hours every day sitting in a chair. Our bodies crave and thrive on movement. Sitting, especially for prolonged periods of time, is actually more stressful on our spine, and the little spongy disks between the bony vertebrae, than standing. This stress is compounded by two other problems: most modern chairs are poorly designed for healthy sitting, and most people have poor posture (and not only while sitting but standing as well).

All of this static sitting, combined with our inhuman chairs and slumped posture, can lead to chronic pain in the neck, shoulders and arms, legs and feet, and last but not least, the lower back. How about you: What's your sitting like? Naturally this question is difficult to answer right away, unless you're already an experienced yoga student or meditator, or are engaged in some other body-awareness practice—in which case you're more likely to be aware of your sitting behavior. Most people though are pretty unconscious about the way they hold themselves in just about any position.

Take a look around the next time you're somewhere where lots of people are sitting, like a restaurant. You'll notice that, first of all, the typically pelvis tends to drop backward. Ideally the lower back is slightly concave; but a drooping pelvis stressfully rounds the lower back outward, convexly. Then the spine tends to collapse, which increases the convexity of the upper back, leading to the familiar Hunchback-of-Notre-Dame appearance. This in turn hollows the chest and shoulders, narrowing the space across the collar bones (clavicles)—which interferes with easy breathing—and bows the head forward, shortening the back of the neck (nape). This latter position can lead to all sorts of problems, such as chronic headaches and jaw problems.

In the first part of this article we'll run through a few simple asana-based exercises that should help counteract some of the deleterious effects of protracted sitting. Of course no amount of exercising will have a significant effect if you continue your faulty sitting behavior. So in part two, we'll learn a few basic tricks that will help us to sit more consciously and gracefully.

## SHORT TERM SOLUTIONS: Five exercises

Here are five asana-based exercises you can practice, in the order they're listed, to counteract the effects of a long day of chair-sitting. For these exercises you'll need a sticky mat, a blanket, a buckled strap, a free wall (or other solid structure), and some sort of watch or timer. Depending on how long you hold the positions, the sequence should take anywhere from 15 to 25 minutes to complete. These exercises are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg; there are dozens more you could learn from a qualified yoga teacher.

### 1. BLANKET ROLL UNDER YOUR SHOULDER BLADES (5 minutes)

Make a blanket roll about 3 to 4 inches in diameter. Lie down with the roll positioned just below your lower shoulder blades (scapulas). Keep your knees bent and feet on

the floor to begin. The tops of your shoulders should either float a little bit above, or rest lightly on, the floor. If the back of your neck is squeezed so that your chin juts sharply toward the ceiling, either support your head on a folded blanket, or decrease the size of the roll under your back. Lay your arms out to your sides, palms up. You can either keep your knees bent and feet on the floor (you'll want to do this if you have any lower back problems), or straighten your legs out onto the floor, thighs firm, and pushing through your heels.

Now feel the roll pressing against your scapulas. Soften your heart and, in your imagination, let your scapulas sink deep into your back torso. Don't help this action along though, by pinching them together toward your spine—keep your upper back broad. Imagine too that your collar bones (clavicles) are lifting away from the upper pairs of ribs and rolling up and over the tops of your shoulders.

Stay in this position for at least 5 minutes, breathing smoothly. When you're ready to exit, roll gently to one side with an exhalation, and push yourself away from the floor, using the strength of your arms.

**BENEFITS:** This exercise stretches the chest and shoulders, which are often tight because of poor posture. It also teaches you how to firm the scapulas against the back torso, an important action that helps support the lifted chest in the sitting position.

## **2. LOOP OVER BASE OF SKULL (modified *supta padangusthasana*) (4-6 minutes)**

Buckle your strap into a large loop. If you pull the loop taut between your thumbs, the doubled strap should be somewhere between 32 and 36 inches long (it can be slightly shorter if the backs of your legs are very flexible). Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor. Exhale your right thigh into your torso and bring the loop over your right sole. Then hook the free end of the loop under the base of your skull, just below that little bony knob, called the inion. Be careful not to position the loop too low on the back of your neck. Then inhale and stretch your right heel up toward the ceiling. When the loop is in place and your knee extended, your upper torso and head should be rounded off the floor.

Now bend your right knee slightly and massage your back thigh with your fingertips. Start in the hollow of the back of your knee and work your way along your thigh toward your sitting bone. Use your fingertips to soften and spread your back thigh muscles (the three hamstrings). Then clasp your hands against your back thigh, and against the resistance of the hands, straighten your knee by pushing up through the back of your heel. Then release the clasped hands and lay your arms on the floor beside your torso. You can keep your left knee bent, foot on the floor, or straighten your left leg out onto the floor, pressing actively through your heel. Continue to push through your right heel toward the ceiling. Create an even stretch along the back of your leg from your sitting bone to your heel.

Also feel the stretch along your nape. Imagine that the strap is pulling the base of your skull away from your nape, opening a wide space. Then lift the crook of your throat (the crease where the front of the throat meets the underside of the chin) diagonally up into your head, toward the top of your spine (at the first cervical vertebra, the atlas). Watch, as you do this, how your tongue softens onto the floor of your mouth.

Stay in this position for 2 to 3 minutes, longer if you have the time. Feel the stretch growing not only along the back of your leg, but along your back torso and neck as well, from the inion to the tail bone. Then bend your right knee, slip the loop off the back of your head, remove your right foot from the loop and insert the left, return the loop to the base of your skull, and repeat on the second side for the same length of time.

**BENEFITS:** This exercise lengthens the backs of the legs, often shortened by long sitting. It also creates space between the skull and nape, which allows the deepening of the crook of the throat. These actions teach you how to hold your head lightly on the top spine in the sitting position.

### **3. RECLINING BELLY TWIST (modified *jathara parivartanasana*) (4-6 minutes)**

Lie on your back and, with an exhale, draw your thighs into your torso. With another exhale, roll your legs to the left and down onto the floor, keeping your knees tucked up near your left shoulder so there's a sharp angle between your thighs and torso. Turn your upper torso to the right. Bring your left hand to your right knee and gently press your legs to the floor. Reach your right arm out to the right, parallel to the line of your shoulders. If your right shoulder doesn't rest comfortably on the floor, be sure not to force it down; rest the back of your right hand on a folded blanket or yoga block.

Deepen your front groins, then soften and lift your belly. Think of lengthening your torso with each inhale, and twisting a little more on each exhale. Hold the twist for 2 to 3 minutes, then lift your legs back to neutral with an exhale. Repeat with your legs to the right for the same length of time.

**BENEFITS:** This exercise softens the belly, and massages the spine and internal organs of the torso.

### **4. BENT-KNEE LUNGE AT A WALL (4-6 minutes)**

Here you'll need a folded blanket and a free wall (or at least something solid you can safely push against). Face the wall and kneel on the blanket, about an arm's length away from the wall. Step your right foot forward and touch your big toe to the wall. Press your hands against the wall, then slide your left knee back from the wall until you feel a comfortable stretch along the front of your left thigh and groin. Notice that as you slide your knee back, your left hip tends to open away from the wall. Try to keep the front of your pelvis square to the wall: as your knee moves back, roll the same-side hip forward. Notice too, when you slide your knee back, that your tail bone tends to poke out of the back of your pelvis, which shortens your lower back. Rather than allow this to happen, burrow your tail bone forward, toward the wall, and lengthen it down toward the floor.

With your palms or fingertips pressing the wall, lift your chest through the top of your sternum bone. Imagine you're leaning back on the roll you rested on in exercise 1, so your scapulas are firm to your back. Be sure to distinguish between the top of your sternum, just below the hollow of your throat, and the bottom of the bone, maybe 6 or 7 inches lower. When instructed to lift the chest, many students tend to push the bottom of the bone forward. This only sharpens the front ribs, hardening

the belly and collapsing the lower back. Feel the stretch all the way up from your left knee, along your thigh, groin, and belly, to the top of your sternum.

Hold this position for 2 to 3 minutes. Then push yourself away from the wall with an inhale, step your right knee back beside the left, bring your left foot forward to the wall, and repeat on the second side for the same length of time.

**BENEFITS:** This exercise stretches the front groins, belly, and chest, often tightened by long sitting.

## **5. DOWNWARD FACING DOG (*adho mukha shvanasana*) (1-3 minutes)**

Rest on all-fours, knees below your hips, toes turned under, hands slightly forward of the shoulders. Spread your palms, index fingers parallel (or if you're tighter in the shoulders, turn them out slightly), with the bases of your index fingers pressed firmly to the floor. Exhale, lift your knees away from the floor, and push your top thighs back to straighten your knees. Lengthen your tail bone away from the back of your pelvis and press it lightly toward your pubis. Against the drop of your tail, lift your sitting bones toward the ceiling as you stretch your heels toward the floor. Be careful not to lock your knees as you straighten them: lift your knee caps straight up toward the hips by contracting your front thigh muscles, don't push back into your knee joint.

Press your outer arms inward, as if to squeeze the sides of your head, and widen your scapulas into this resistance. Keep the tops of your shoulders soft. Align your head between your arms, don't let it hang. Stay in this pose anywhere from 1 to 3 minutes, breathing easily, then bend your knees to the floor with an exhale and rest in Child's Pose (*balasana*).

**BENEFITS:** Downward Facing Dog is one pose that's good for whatever ails you. It stretches the shoulders, spine, and legs, and strengthens the arms and legs. After a period of static sitting, Down Dog can stimulate your brain when it's weary, or calm it if it's disturbed.

**LONG TERM SOLUTION:** Proper sitting

Sit down on a chair with your typical sitting posture. After reading the third paragraph in our introduction, ask your best friend (or your yoga teacher) to observe your sitting posture, both from the front and the sides, and make his or her best assessment. Now look at the following five points, and use them to make any necessary sitting adjustments.

1. Sit on a slight lift, such as a firm pillow, so your pelvis is a bit higher than your knees. Your thighs then should angle down from your hips to your knees. Set your feet flat on the floor.
2. Sit away from the chair back, don't slump on the back support.
3. Sit on the middle of your sit bones, don't roll toward the back of the bones. Your tail bone and pubic bone should be more or less equidistant from the seat, so the bowl of your pelvis is in a neutral position.
4. When you lean forward over your desk, lengthen your front torso long between your pubis and navel, and navel and top sternum. Tip your torso forward from your groins, don't round forward from your belly.
5. Balance your head lightly on the top of your spine. Keep the space between your

inion and your nape wide open, and your chin dropped slightly toward the top sternum. This will lengthen your neck and balance your head on the top spine, softening the muscles of the nape.

And no matter how well you sit it's still important to get up periodically and move around and stretch. At first the new sitting position will feel somewhat odd, and you'll naturally lapse back into your old habitual ways. Be persistent! Eventually your new way of sitting will feel wonderfully comfortable, and you'll wonder how you ever survived sitting the old-fashioned way.