



# Shoulderstand – Sarvangasana



Sarvangasana (sarva = all anga = limb)



Sarvangasana literally means “all limbs pose”, and that says a lot about what's involved in doing this wonderful inversion. While the shoulders and arms provide the base, you need a strong upward thrust of energy through your legs and core to lift fully into shoulderstand. For this reason you might think of it as "rocket-launcher pose." The benefits of sarvangasana are so many it could also be called "The Great Healer." This pose stretches the neck, shoulder and upper back muscles, strengthens the legs and upper body, and opens the chest. It increases circulation to the head and upper chest while draining used blood and toxins from the legs, pelvis and abdominal area. Consequently it helps treat colds, digestive problems, menstrual disorders and respiratory ailments.

Shoulderstand stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows the heartbeat and calms the mind. So it counteracts nervousness, tension headaches and insomnia. This asana has a special connection with visuddha or throat chakra, where the thyroid and parathyroid glands are located. By promoting the balanced functioning of these glands, which control metabolism and hormonal activity, sarvangasana gives you a calm energy that nourishes body and soul. For this reason, it is known as the "Mother" of poses, the Queen of the asanas. Whenever you need a lift, put yourself in this healing inversion and let the Great Mother take care of you.

## Step by Step

- Lay your arms on the floor alongside your torso, then bend your knees and set your feet against the floor with the heels close to the sitting bones. Exhale, press your arms against the floor, and push your feet away from the floor, drawing your thighs into the front torso.
- Continue to lift by curling the pelvis and then the back torso away from the floor, so that your knees come toward your face. Stretch your arms out parallel to the edge of the blanket and turn them outward so the fingers press against the floor (and the thumbs point behind you). Bend your elbows and draw them toward each other. Lay the backs of your upper arms on the mat and spread your palms against the back of your torso. Raise your pelvis over the shoulders, so that the





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torso is relatively perpendicular to the floor. Walk your hands up your back (toward the floor) without letting the elbows slide too much wider than shoulder width.

- Inhale and lift your bent knees toward the ceiling, bringing your thighs in line with your torso and hanging the heels down by your buttocks. Press your tailbone toward your pubis and turn the upper thighs inward slightly. Finally inhale and straighten the knees, pressing the heels up toward the ceiling.
- Soften the throat and tongue. Firm the shoulder blades against the back, and move the sternum toward the chin. Your forehead should be relatively parallel to the floor, your chin perpendicular. Press the backs of your upper arms and the tops of your shoulders actively into the mat, and try to lift the upper spine away from the floor. Gaze softly at your chest.
- As a beginning practitioner stay in the pose for about 30 seconds. Gradually add 5 to 10 seconds to your stay every day or so until you can comfortably hold the pose for 3 minutes. Then continue for 3 minutes each day for a week or two, until you feel relatively comfortable in the pose. Again gradually add 5 to 10 seconds onto your stay every day or so until you can comfortably hold the pose for 5 minutes. To come down, exhale, bend your knees into your torso again, and roll your back torso slowly and carefully onto the floor, keeping the back of your head on the floor.

## Benefits

- Calms the brain and helps relieve stress and mild depression
- Stimulates the thyroid and prostate glands and abdominal organs
- Stretches the shoulders and neck
- Tones the legs and buttocks
- Improves digestion
- Helps relieve the symptoms of menopause
- Reduces fatigue and alleviates insomnia
- Therapeutic for asthma, infertility, and sinusitis

## Contraindications and Cautions

- Diarrhea
- Headache
- High blood pressure
- Menstruation





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- Neck injury
- Pregnancy: If you are experienced with this pose, you can continue to practice it late into pregnancy. However, don't take up the practice of Sarvangasana after you become pregnant.

Sarvangasana is considered to be an intermediate to advanced pose. Do not perform this pose without sufficient prior experience or unless you have the supervision of an experienced instructor

## Modifications and Props

Rolling up into Sarvangasana from the floor might be difficult at first. You can use a wall to help you get into the pose. Set your blankets up a foot or so from the wall (the exact distance depends on your height: Taller students will be farther from the wall, shorter students closer). Sit sideways on your support (with one side toward the wall) and, on an exhalation, swing your shoulders down onto the edge of the blanket and your legs up onto the wall. Bend your knees to right angles, push your feet against the wall and lift your pelvis off the support. When your torso and thighs are perpendicular to the floor, lift your feet away from the wall and complete the pose. To come down, exhale your feet back to the wall and roll down.

## Deepen The Pose

It's common in this pose for students to press only the index finger sides of the hands against the back. Be sure to spread both palms wide against your back torso. Push in and up against the back ribs, especially with the ring fingers and pinkies. Periodically take your hands away from the back, press the shoulder blades in, and return your hands to the back a little closer to the head than they were before.

## Alternatives to Sarvangasana

- Half shoulder stand / ardha sarvangasana
- Viparita Karani : Inverted Leg Stretch

**Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees the others.**





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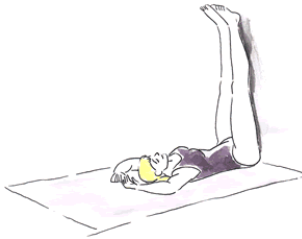


## Half shoulder stand / ardha sarvangasana



- Lying on the floor with the arms along side the body with the palms down, bend the knees and kick and rock the legs up and back, bringing the bent knees to the forehead and placing the hands under the hips.
- Cupping the hips like you are holding a big bowl of fruit, begin to lift the legs up, straightening them over your head. Support the weight of the body with the arms and the shoulders, having very little or no weight in the head and neck.
- Find a position where you can balance the legs over the head and relax the leg muscles, using as little effort as possible to be still.
- Breathe and hold 4-10 breaths.
- To release: bend the knees back to the head, and carefully and slowly roll the spine back onto the floor.

## Viparita Karani : Inverted Leg Stretch Heels lengthening to sky with legs together.



"Let go of past and future struggles. Experience your life in the present moment. There's nowhere else to be."

Here is the great mother of all restorative postures. It combines the benefits of corpse pose with the gifts of a gentle inversion. This posture promotes resting in the heart of loving kindness. It gently lengthens the hamstrings. The floor provides a valuable feedback loop allowing the spine to lengthen and stretch with maximum support. The sacrum is flattened to complete a graceful full-spinal extension while the lungs are freed to empty and fill with ease. Specially folded blankets may be used beneath the sacrum or under the length of the spine to enhance a deeper union with the breath.





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## Posture Points

- Hands remain open to remind your heart to be open.
- Spine gently "flattens" while preserving natural curves.
- Perineum moves towards wall.
- Heels gently lengthen to sky; tops of thighs spin gently inward.
- Head rests gently on the floor with eyes closed.
- Always maintain a calm and even breath.

***Did you Know?** The gluteus muscles, quadriceps and hamstrings move massive amounts of blood as the largest muscle groups in the body. A restful inversion like Viparita Karani aids venous blood flow, relieves tension and "decompresses" cell membranes, allowing full relaxation of muscle fibres.*

*Enjoy, Gregory*

