



Gentle Yoga for Persons with Low Bone Density or Osteoporosis

Introduction

Osteoporosis is a bone disease that increases the risk of bone fractures (breaks). Yoga stresses balance, strength-building, and alignment which can help people avoid bone injuries. Low impact yoga can help with bone growth and build stronger bones. Light back-bending positions can help open or spread out the spine and build strength here. There are some positions that should be avoided if you have osteoporosis. Before starting a yoga program, talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits.

What is Gentle Yoga?

Let's start by talking about what yoga is **not**. Yoga is **not** a belief system or religion. Yoga is way to exercise that helps your body, mind and spirit feel better.

The term **yoga** means union (or joining together) of the mind, body and spirit in Sanskrit, the language of early India. Yoga has been practiced for centuries in many forms.

Gentle yoga is a type of yoga which does as its name suggests. This is a low-impact, gentle method of yoga. It is **not** as hard as other forms of yoga. Gentle yoga is for persons who should **not** or cannot meet the demands of physically-straining exercises.

Be sure you talk to your main doctor before starting gentle yoga if you have osteoporosis or low bone density.

Is gentle yoga okay for me if I...

- Cannot bend well
- Carry extra weight
- Have a health condition that limits my activity
- Have bad joints (hips, knees, etc.)
- Have low back pain
- Have trouble focusing
- Have not exercised much in the past

Then gentle yoga may be a good choice for you!

How can gentle yoga help me?

- Improves balance
- Improves posture
- Reduces stress
- Strengthens bones
- Strengthens muscles
- Stretches muscles for better movement

How can gentle yoga be an advantage to you?

- It is a very flexible type of exercise.
- It can be practiced in the comfort of your own home or in a class setting.
 - * At home, it can be done with a video or using this handout.
 - * If done in a class or if a video is used, be sure the trainer or video knows about osteoporosis and positions that should not be done.
- It does not call for special equipment. Most of the items are found in your home.
- It can be a social event or offer personal time. You can do it with friends or alone.
- It can help you unwind, stretch, gain strength or breathe better.

Breathing is key

Even though we breathe every day, all day, controlled deep breathing can provide more oxygen than usual breathing. Oxygen is vital for the body's organs, especially the heart and brain.

This controlled deep breathing in yoga takes practice, especially when this type of breathing is done while doing yoga. Other names for this controlled deep breathing are **Thoughtful Breathing** or **Conscious Breathing**.

Ocean breath

Ocean breath is a common type of controlled deep breathing. This will be a very helpful method of breathing as you go through yoga workouts.

- Breathe in (inhale) through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Breathe out (exhale) through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Breaths are smooth and even. There should not be any starts and stops of breaths through the inhaling and exhaling process.

Become a noisy breather

As you become better at breathing through your nose, start to breathe a little louder. Breathe just loudly enough that someone standing next to you could hear you breathing. This might sound like gentle waves rolling onto the shore. The rhythmic sound of these gentle waves will help relax you into the yoga positions.

Quiet and prepare your mind

As you practice breathing and focus on the sounds and feel of breathing, you may find that you are able to quiet the noises in your mind that are reminding you to:

- Pick up some groceries on the way home
- Call your neighbor
- Buy a gift for your niece

These should fade away during the yoga breathing. Many people who practice yoga believe that the focus on breathing is one of the reasons they can quiet their mind and focus better during the day. This will take practice and hopefully, this will happen for you, too.

Yoga positions

You will find many types of yoga, yoga stretches or positions. Practice some easy positions. Try these gentle positions, and then try other types of yoga if you wish. As a person

with fragile (weak) bones, always be careful to use gentle positions and talk with your doctor and the experts in yoga for persons with osteoporosis. Hold the position (based on your ability) for 4 to 6 controlled deep breaths. One breath is an inhale and then an exhale in one smooth movement.

Forward bends of the spine place pressure on the vertebrae (back bones). When this is done with a spine that is weakened by osteoporosis, this can hurt the spine.

Do not do these poses:

- Where you lie on your back and pull your legs toward your chest
- Headstands
- The plow
- Shoulder stands
- The downdog
- Twists
- Jumping
- Abdominal (belly) crunches

Balancing positions can be done while standing. This helps:

- Body awareness
- Concentration (focus)
- Muscle strengthening

If you have weakened hips or poor balance, use props such as a chair or wall to help keep you safe.

A strong abdomen (belly) and core muscles support the spine and promote good posture. This has huge benefits for persons with osteoporosis.

- Avoid positions that do not support your neck and spine or compress (squeeze) the spine.
- Avoid the boat pose if you do not have strong enough muscles to support your neck and spine well.
- Do not do any exercise that places your body's weight on your neck. This can lead to spinal damage in this area.

Items most often used

- Yoga mat, towel or blanket
- 1 or 2 sturdy, armless chairs (A wheelchair with removable armrests works well, too,)
- Yoga block(s) or a small stool, about 6 to 10 inches tall (optional)

Warm up first!

Some gentle warm-ups help prepare the heart, muscles and joints for this yoga session. Try the deep controlled breathing followed by:

- Side stretches
- Arm circles
- Lifting above your head and lowering your arms
- March in place or while sitting

Two “gentle” choices:

- **Very Gentle Yoga (VGY)** Persons who are new to yoga should start here. This level is ideal for persons who have:
 - * Poor balance, flexibility or strength
 - * Trouble standing for short periods
 - * Trouble going down to the floor and getting back up
- **Gentle Yoga (GY)** These positions are for persons who must:
 - * Have fair strength and flexibility for these positions
 - * Be able to stand safely during the position
 - * Be able to get down to the floor and back up

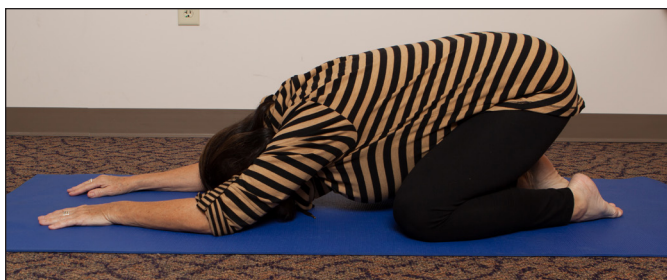
The next pages show positions that are labeled “VGN” for Very Gentle Yoga or “GY” for Gentle Yoga. Try the “GY” positions only if you feel able.



Child's Position VGY (Balasana)

This position can be a nice resting pose you can stay in for up to a few minutes during warm up, cool down or any time during the gentle yoga routine.

- Begin seated with the feet at hip-width apart.
- Rest forearms on thighs.
- Place forehead in hands.
- Relax shoulders with each breath.
- Keep your back as flat as possible.



Child's Position GY (Balasana)

- Begin on mat with knees wide apart and flexed.
- Rest hips on heels.
 - * If this position is hard or causes knee pain, place a folded blanket behind your knees.
- Stretch your arms forward, rest head on mat (or as close to it as possible). If your head does **not** reach the floor, use a block or pillow to rest it on.



Mountain Position VGY (Tadasana)

This is a simple position that can prepare you for all the other positions. It is a way to embrace the deep controlled breathing and begin a yoga practice.

- Sit tall with your back **not** supported by the chair.
- Press feet flat on floor.
- Relax shoulders.
- Stretch your whole spine upward and lift the top of your head to the sky.



Mountain Position GY (Tadasana)

- Stand with the feet at hip-width apart.
- Relax shoulders.
- Keep hands at side; stretching hands toward feet.
- Press feet flat, evenly on floor.
- Stretch your whole spine upward and lift the top of your head to the sky.



Extended Mountain Position VGY

- Sit tall with your back **not** supported by the chair.
- Stretch hands high above your head, shoulder-width apart.
- Relax shoulders.
- Tighten your thigh and belly muscles by pressing feet down into the floor.
- Stretch your whole spine upward and lift the top of your head to the sky.



Extended Mountain Position GY

- Stand with the feet at hip-width apart.
- Stretch hands high above, shoulder-width apart.
- Tighten your thigh and belly muscles by pressing feet down into floor.
- Relax shoulders.
- Stretch your whole spine upward and lift the top of your head to the sky.



The Cat Position is often used with the Cow Position. Move between the two positions smoothly and slowly while taking a deep controlled breath.

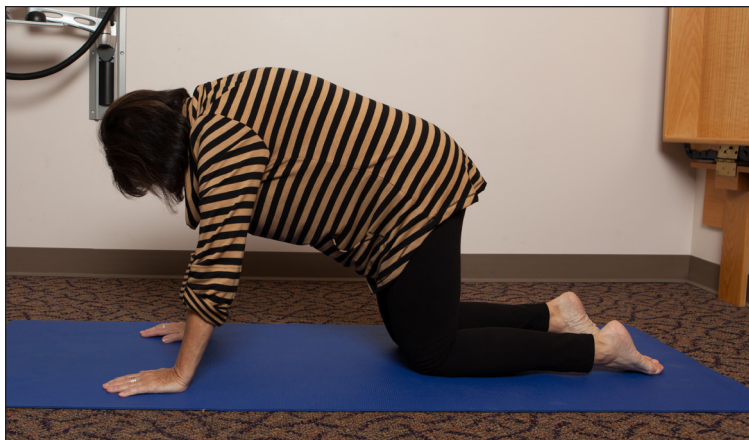
Cat Position VGY (exhale)

- Sit tall with your back **not** supported by the chair.
- Press feet flat on floor.
- Pull in belly muscles.
- Tip pelvis and hip bones backward to round back.
 - * If you have osteoporosis, keep your back flat. (Do **not** round your back).
- Tuck chin down.
- Round shoulders forward.



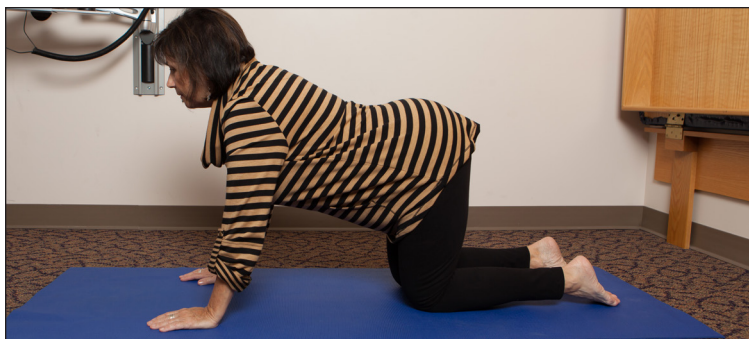
Cow Position VGY (inhale)

- Sit tall with your back not supported by the chair.
- Relax belly muscles.
- Tip pelvis and hip bones forward and hollow out back (concave).
- Lift chin and chest gently.
- Press shoulders back and down.



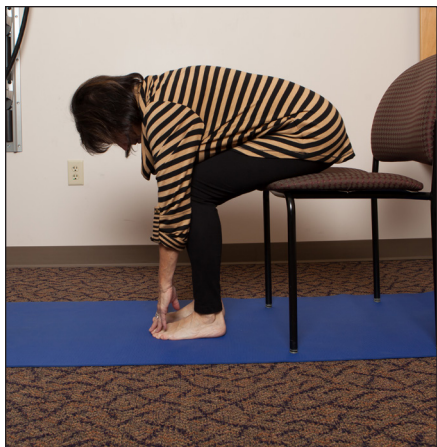
Cat Position GY (exhale)

- Begin with hands and knees on floor.
- Pull in belly muscles to round back.
If you have osteoporosis, keep your back flat. (Do not round your back).
- Bring chin toward caved chest.



Cow Position GY (inhale)

- Begin with hands and knees on floor.
- Lift chin; open chest.
- Press shoulders back.
- Allow belly to sink downward, to hollow out back (concave).



Forward Fold Position VGY (Ardha Uttansana)

This forward bend stretches the hamstrings and the inner thighs.

- Sit toward front of chair, your back away from back of chair, feet flat on floor.
- Fold upper body forward (or hinge forward at the hips) slowly, bending at hips. Keep your back as flat as possible.
- Hold or touch shins, ankles or toes gently. If painful, let go the upper body fold until comfortable.
- Relax head, shoulders and neck; face the floor.



Forward Fold Position GY (Ardha Uttansana)

- Stand facing chair seat with feet at hip-width apart.
- Bend knees slightly. If your legs are tight, your back will be harder to straighten.
- Fold upper body forward (or hinge forward at the hips) slowly, bending at hips. Keep your back as flat as possible.
- Rest arms on seat of chair, placing your hands on something will keep your back flat.
- Relax head, shoulders and neck; face the floor.



Staff Position VGY

- Sit toward front of chair, your back away from back of chair.
- Stretch legs forward onto the floor, blocks or small stool.
- Bend feet (Bring toes upward).
- Sit up straight and flatten back; reach arms forward gently.
- Bend forward at hips, leading with the chest; keep back flat.
- Keep shoulders relaxed, down and back.
- Bend only as far as you can comfortably; keep legs straight and back straight.



Staff Position GY

- Sit on mat on floor.
- Stretch legs forward.
- Sit up straight and flatten your back; reach arms forward gently.
- Bend forward at hips; keep your back flat, use chest to move.
- Keep shoulders relaxed, down and back.
- Bend only as far as you can comfortably; keep legs straight and back straight.



Camel Position VGY

- Sit toward front of chair, your back away from back of chair, feet at hip-width.
- Place hands on chair seat behind buttocks.
- Push belly and chest forward.
- Roll shoulders back; look toward ceiling as much as comfortably possible.



Camel Position GY

- Kneel on floor using support if needed.
- Press hips forward, reach hands to gently touch lower back.
- Push belly and chest forward.
- Roll shoulders back; look toward ceiling as much as comfortably possible.



Boat Position VGY

- Sit sideways on chair.
- Tighten belly muscles and round your back slightly.
- Hold back of chair with inside hand; lift chest upward.
- Keep spine straight; lift one leg, bending knee slightly; hold back of knee with hand.
- Repeat on other side.

A more advanced Boat Position can be tried by lifting the second leg and stretching it straight out into the air while keeping your balance on the chair.



Boat Position GY

- Sit on floor with the legs stretched in front. Bend knees slightly.
- Place hands behind knees to start.
- Rock back slightly to balance.
- Lift feet to have lower legs even to floor.
- Keep spine straight; lift chest upward.
- Reach arms forward if possible and when ready; relax shoulders.



Tree Position VGY (Vrksasana)

This is a one-legged balancing pose that builds trust in yourself and helps center the mind. It is not easy to think about your stress when you are balancing on one leg! Lift your arms into the air to make “branches” for your tree.

- Sit toward front of chair, your back away from back of chair.
- Lift right leg and cross ankle just above left knee. (If this is too hard, cross right ankle over left ankle.)
- Move right knee over so the space between legs is open. (The right ankle should be on the left knee if possible).
- Bring palms to meet at the level of your heart.
- Sit tall, stretching spine.
- Lift joined hands over head, if possible.
- Repeat on your other side.



Tree Position GY (Vrksasana)

Use a chair if needed for balance support.

- Hold back of chair with one hand.
- Lift one foot, place it at side of ankle, at mid-calf or above knee joint. Do **not** place the foot directly at the knee joint.
- Stand tall, stretching spine.
- Relax shoulders; bring other hand to level of heart or directly above your head.
- If your balance is OK, join palms together at heart level or above head. If your balance is not good, keep one hand on the chair and place the other at heart level or above.
- Repeat on your other side.



Eagle Position VGY

- Sit toward front of chair, your back away from back of chair.
- Cross left leg over right; wrap legs tightly.
- Bring elbows to meet chest height.
- Cross wrists and bring back of hands to meet; point thumbs toward nose.
- Press arms and legs together tightly.
- Pull in belly and sit tall.
- Repeat on your other side.



Eagle Position GY

Have a chair on hand for balance support if needed.

- Stand with knees bent slightly.
- Cross left leg over right. Left toes may touch ground for balance as needed.
- Bring elbows to meet chest height.
- Cross right wrist and bring back of hands to meet; point thumbs toward nose.
- Press arms and legs together tightly.
- Pull in belly and straighten spine.
- Repeat on your other side.



Crescent Lunge Position VGY

- Sit sideways on chair.
- Stretch outside leg backwards, turn toes under.
- Keep knee of front leg directly over ankle.
- Raise arms above at shoulder-width.
- Reach up and sit tall.
- Tighten belly muscles.
- Relax shoulders slightly.
- Repeat on your other side.



Crescent Lunge Position GY

Use chair for balance support if needed.

- Stand with the feet at hip-width apart facing back of chair.
- Step right foot back comfortably. Rest foot on toes, heel up off floor.
- Keep left leg flexed, knee directly above ankle.
- Hold back of chair with both hands, one hand, or no hands as needed for balance.
- Lift other hand(s) upward; relax shoulders.
- Stretch spine upward.
- Repeat on your other side.



Cobbler Position VGY

Use two chairs facing each other.

- Sit toward front of one chair, your back away from back of chair.
- Place feet on second chair, bottom of feet together touching each other.
- Hold ankles.
- Drop knees open gently.
- Sit tall; keep back flat.
- Rest elbows on inside of thighs; fold forward slowly at hips.
- Keep chin up, spine straight.



Cobbler Position GY

- Sit on mat on floor.
- Bring bottom of feet together touching each other; allow knees to drop open.
- Hold ankles.
- Sit tall; keep back flat.
- Rest elbows on inside of thighs; fold forward slowly at hips.
- Keep chin up, spine straight.



Half Pigeon Position VGY

- Sit sideways on chair.
- Pull inside foot onto chair. (If **not** able to move into this position, think about using blocks to support the foot, keeping the hip turned.)
- Stretch other leg back; straighten knee as much as you are able; curl toes under.
- Pull in belly muscles; flatten lower back; sit tall.
- Rest right hand on back of chair. Gently push the right knee with the left hand.
- Repeat on other side.



Half Pigeon Position GY

- Lie on floor (or mat on floor).
- Draw knees to chest.
- Cross right ankle over left knee.
- Join fingers behind left knee.
- Draw left knee gently toward chest;
allow right knee to drop open.
- Repeat on your other side.



Warrior 2 Position GY (Virabhadrasana II)

This pose strengthens the legs and helps to open the inner thighs. This is a Gentle Yoga position only. There is not a VGY position for the Warrior 2 Position.

- Place feet wide apart, about a leg's distance apart.
- Turn the right leg out 90 degrees, then angle your left toes in slightly.
- Hold arms out to the side, to be level with the floor.
- Bend the right knee so that it is above the ankle.
- Form a square with right knee and hold the pose.
- Repeat for your other side.

Modification: If it is difficult to hold the pose, come in and out of the position with each breath. If you are unsteady, hold the position with a chair or counter.



Swan Dive VGY

- Lie face down on floor (or mat on floor).
- Bend the elbows and place hands palm down above the shoulder.
- Push the shoulders up, arching your back and support the upper body on the elbows and forearm.



Baby Swan GY

- Lie on floor (or mat on floor).
- Bend the elbows and place hands palm down above the shoulder.
- Push the shoulders up, arching the back and support the upper body on the palms of the hands.

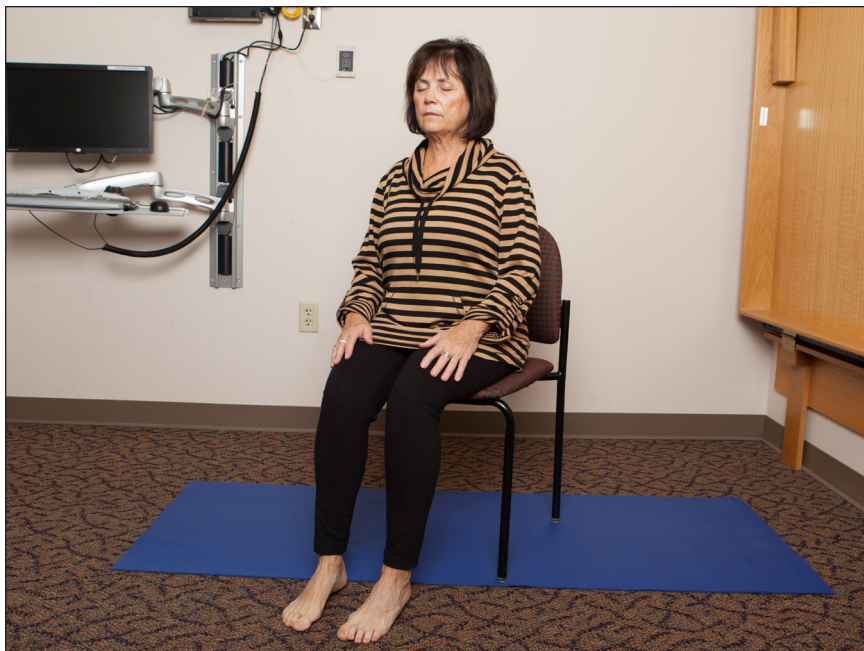


Legs Up the Wall Position GY (Viparita Karani)

This is a Gentle Yoga position only. There is not a VGY position for the Legs Up the Wall Position. Only do this position if you have been trained and are able to safely lower yourself to the ground and get up to a standing position again.

- Lie on your back
- Walk your legs up a flat wall until the legs are straight and your buttocks meets the wall.
- Place a pillow under your lower back for added support if wanted.

Modification: Persons who are new to this position can have tingling in the legs. If you feel tingling, ride the legs down the wall and hold until the tingling goes away. Walk the feet back up the wall if comfortable.



Savasana Position VGY

For many, especially those who have not practiced yoga before, doing nothing is in fact very challenging. This position is calming and grounding, and can be used to cool down.

- Sit at back of chair; allow your back to be fully supported by chair.
- Feet flat on floor or stool.
- Close eyes; relax shoulders.
- Drop chin gently.
- Relax and let go of the tension in your body, along with your face, eyes, jaw, scalp, back, legs, and feet.
- Clear your thoughts; focus on your breath.



Savasana Position GY

- Lie on floor (or mat on floor).
- Legs and hips are about hip-width apart. Rest arms at about a 45 degree angle to the torso, palms facing up. Relax feet and legs.
- If your low back is tense, place feet and calves up on chair.
- Close eyes; open palms up and relax shoulder blades.
- Relax and let go of the tension in your body, along with your face, eyes, jaw, scalp, back, legs, and feet.
- Drop chin gently.
- Clear your thoughts; focus on your breath.

Modification: Place a folded blanket under the knees to help lengthen your lower back and remove some tension from this area. Placing blankets over the pelvis can help relax the body and the mind.

Conclusion

Yoga has become a popular and successful method to improve posture, balance, bone strength and agility (quickness) in persons with osteoporosis.

It is possible for some persons to:

- Lose a little roundness in the upper spine
- Stand straighter
- Become steadier
- Move with greater trust in yourself

Yoga can help a person feel empowered and fight helplessness against osteoporosis. Many have begun to make yoga a part of their lifelong plan to slow the progression of bone disease.

When you are ready

Everyone's body is different. Yoga positions should be changed based on your abilities and physical limitations. Ask your doctor about the physical demands of the yoga you are interested in.

- If you prefer to practice yoga in your home, start slow and advance your strength in a deliberate and thoughtful way.
- If you prefer to practice yoga in a classroom setting, ask the trainer about his or her knowledge about safe yoga for persons with osteoporosis.

Find one that works for your body, mind and spirit!

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