

# YOGA THERAPY *for Digestive Health*

*“Food is, verily, the first among all that is created, therefore it is said to be the medicine for all. One who meditates on food as Brahman, surely obtains all food.” - Taittiriya Upanishad, 2:1*

**HAVE YOU EVER “CHOKED” IN A PRESSURE FILLED SITUATION, MADE A “GUT-WRENCHING” DECISION OR FELT NERVOUS “BUTTERFLIES” BEFORE SPEAKING IN FRONT OF A LARGE GROUP?** If so, then you have had first-hand experience of some of the effects that a short bout of stress can have on the digestive system.

Ancient yogis understood that good digestion is key to radiant health and sought to understand the mind-body connection. Yoga therapists tend to view the digestive system as a very sensitive mirror of the mind and will encourage a client with digestive issues to examine overall lifestyle choices, emotions and other mental components in the healing process. Think of it like this - the mind is like a sea, the body is the land and their sphere of interaction is the shore. When the mind is peaceful and relaxed, the sea is calm. When the mind is troubled or stressed the sea become turbulent and waves beat against the shore, tearing away large sections of the land. This is the psychosomatic process that can result in digestive distress and disease in the body. Some common examples of the effects of stress on the digestive system include esophagus spasms, indigestion, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, stomach ulcers, celiacs disease, irritable bowel syndrome as well as other more severe digestive ailments.

When a human being is under stress, the body activates what we have come to know as the "flight or fight" response in the central nervous system. In a matter of seconds, most of the blood in the body gets shunted out from the digestive system and into the major muscle groups. This has a negative impact on the contractions of the digestive muscles that help move food through the body as well as the fluids and secretions that are needed for healthy digestion. While this particular response mechanism works well for a person who is in immediate danger and needs to run (like a caveman saving himself from a large predator) it also necessitates a period of relaxation and recovery afterwards. The unfortunate plight of many people is that they live in a constant state of stress and do not allow enough time for self-care and relaxation. The body does not know how to distinguish the stress of running from the proverbial tiger from the stress of a big meeting at work, a difficult family situation or even watching a scary movie – it all has the same impact. The modern American lifestyle is so jammed packed with activity that just getting out the door to scheduled “recreational” activities can be stressful.

## How Yoga Poses Help

Yoga poses work on the soft tissues of the body, like a hand gently squeezing a sponge. When the organs of the digestive system are compressed in poses, stale and waste-bearing fluids in those areas are encouraged out of the tissues. Once these materials are freed up, the body is better able to eliminate them. When an area is opened or stretched out in a yoga pose, new life-giving nutrients are able to circulate into the cells. In this systematic way, yoga poses massage the vital organs associated with the digestive system, stimulate the digestive muscles and increase the wave like movements in the body that are known as Peristalsis. Yogic breathing exercises send oxygen deep into the cells of the body and help it to absorb nutrients and excrete waste products thoroughly. In essence, all of the tools of Yoga work together to reduce the stress response, rebalance the autonomic nervous system and create a powerful relaxation response that allows the healing functions of the parasympathetic nervous system to occur.

## The Digestive System – A Brief Overview

The digestive tract is a series of hollow organs joined in a long, twisting tube that includes the mouth, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, rectum and anus. Organs that help with digestion, but are not part of the digestive tract include the tongue, saliva glands, pancreas, liver and gallbladder. Parts of other organ systems, such as the nerves and blood also play a major role in the digestive process.

The chief goal of the digestive system is to break down huge macromolecules (proteins, fats and starch) which cannot be absorbed intact, into smaller molecules (amino acids, fatty acids and glucose) that can be absorbed across the wall of the tube and into the circulatory system for dissemination throughout the body. The process begins in the mouth, where food and liquids are taken in and is completed in the small intestine. There are four basic steps in the process:

- **Mastication/Ingestion:** taking in and chewing/mixing of food. Chewing food properly is important, as the enzymes in the saliva start the process of the food breaking down.
- **Digestion:** the movement of food through the digestive track in combination with a chemical breakdown of large molecules of food into smaller molecules.
- **Absorption:** nutrients become available to all cells in the body and are utilized by the body cells in metabolism.
- **Elimination:** the removal of indigestible waste in the form of urine or feces.

## Better Food Choices for Better Digestion

One of the ways that Yoga contributes to healthy digestion is that the practitioner develops better observation skills along with the ability to slow down eating habits and make healthier food choices. People seeking a positive quality of mind, relaxation and good digestive health will naturally choose foods that give

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rise to a sense of balance and harmony. The optimal diet will vary from person to person, and Yoga practices offer a way for individuals to engage in the self-discovery process and better understand the relationship between food choices and mental/physical well being.

### Eating as a Meditative Practice

Come to the table relaxed and with awareness, and practice deep breathing to become more relaxed before eating if necessary. As you eat, remain aware of the body, breath and mind. Imagine sitting at the table with a favorite deity or great spiritual teacher. Stay mindful of posture and keep the spine long. Try not to cross the legs so fluids and energy can flow freely into the abdomen. Remain fully aware of the process of chewing and swallowing. Each taste, temperature and texture can be fully experienced. Once the meal is complete, remain aware that food has passed down into the stomach and the digestive process is underway.



### Meditation for Digestion:

Sit in Heros pose or Easy pose and visualize the digestive tract in the abdomen, becoming fully aware of all of its movements and sensations. Use any knowledge of anatomy to visualize an ideal digestion in progress in the body. Focus on the natural rhythm of the breath in the abdomen. Utilize the visual of the sun resting

at navel center and radiating digestive power. Feel its warmth digesting the food and sending prana out to different parts of the body. Stay seated and aware for 5 – 10 min.

### Yoga Breathing Exercises for Digestive Health:

**Abdominal Breathing:** This breath stimulates peristalsis and relaxes the abdomen. It can be performed seated, laying down or standing. Close the mouth with the inhalation, slow down the intake of breath and direct it down into the abdomen, expanding the belly out like a balloon. With an exhalation, prolong the release of air through the nose and relax the belly back towards the spine. After some practice, count the length of the inhalation and exhalation and bring them to an equal count. Repeat 10 – 20x. As practice progresses, lengthen the count of both. Practice this breath on its own or in a yoga pose practice session.

### YOGA POSES FOR MAINTAINING DIGESTIVE HEALTH

#### Knees to Chest

From a reclining position, gently bend the knees and bring the hands to the back of the thighs or in front to the shins. With an exhalation, draw them in towards the body and focus on the abdominal breath. Hold 30 sec - 2 min.



#### Cat/Cow

From all fours, bring the hands under the shoulders and the knees under the hips. With an inhalation drop the belly down and tilt the tailbone upward, gently arching the low back as the heart, throat and gaze open slightly upward. With the exhalation, tuck the

tailbone under, round the upper back as the hands press into the mat to help spread the shoulder blades open and relax the head and neck. Repeat the movements with the breath, 10 – 20x.

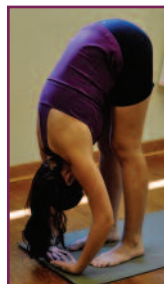


#### Downward Facing Dog

From a table position, walk the hands out in front of the shoulders and spread the fingers and palms wide. Gently lift the knees off the earth a couple of inches. Keep the knees bent, press the chest back towards the thighs, draw the shoulder blades back and down the body and bring the belly button back towards the spine. Walk out the legs for a bit until the body is able to sink both heels down towards the earth. Breathe and hold 1 – 3 min.

#### Flowing Standing Forward Fold

From downward dog, walk the feet up to meet the hands and bring the body into a standing forward fold with the feet hips distance apart. Extend the arms long by the ears and engage the lower abdomen. With an inhalation and



a long flat back, lift the arms and torso and reach up and out of the lower back into Arching Mountain. With an exhalation fold forward and bring the hands to rest on the front of the shins or thighs. Inhale halfway up into a flat back and exhale fold forward. Repeat the combination of movements 2 – 5x. Finish with a prolonged forward fold and hold 30 sec – 1 min.

#### Squat with Ashwini Mudra

Widen the standing position to about mats distance apart and turn the toes out to point at approximately 11 and 1 on a clock. With an exhalation, bend the knees and bring the buttocks down towards the earth. If the heels will not comfortably come to the floor, tuck a folded blanket or pillow underneath them and rest into the support. Press palms together to aid the elbows as they gently encourage the groin to open. Practice *Ashwini Mudra* (Horse Seal) while holding the pose by gently contracting the sphincter muscles of the anus with the inhalation and relaxing them on the exhalation. Hold 30 sec – 2 min.



*Note: If the knees are injured or will simply not sustain a squat, gently sit back onto the buttocks, turn the feet out, bring the hands to the ankles and use the arms to encourage the groin to open.*

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### Seated Twist

From a crossed legged position, inhale to lengthen the spine. With the next inhalation reach the arms long by the ears, relax the shoulders. With an exhalation, bring the left hand to the right knee or thigh and the right arm behind the back, fingertips or hand touching down to the earth for support. Hold for 30 sec - 2 min. Slowly unwind and take the twist on the left side.

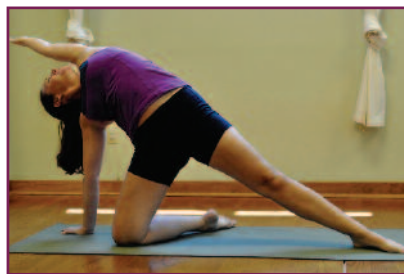


*Note: Twisting to the right first and then the left will increase the movement of the bowels (good for hypo-digestion). Twisting to the left first and then to right will slow down the movement of bowels (good for hyper-digestion).*



### Seated Side Bend/Extended Side Angle Combination

From a seated position, extend the right leg and open it out to the right. Bend the left knee and bring the left foot to the inner right thigh. Place the right hand on the right leg and turn the torso towards the left knee. With an inhalation, extend the left arm up and with an exhalation arch it over towards the right. Hold 30 sec - 2 min. With an inhalation, bring the torso back to center and the right hand to earth next to the right hip. With the next inhalation, pick up the hips off the ground. Extend the left leg and place the left foot on the earth. Once settled, extend the left arm over the left ear and reach into a full side body stretch. Hold 30 sec - 2 min. When finished, slowly bring the hips back to the ground and take the same combination of poses on the left side.



### Locust

From a prone position, bring the chin to rest on the mat and the arms by the sides. Let the hip bones relax into the mat. With an inhalation lift the chest and legs a few inches off the floor. In this pose the continued abdominal breath offers the opportunity to self-massage the intestines as the body gently rocks with breath. Hold 30 sec - 1.5 min. Release the body back to the earth and rest.



### Wide Knee Childs Pose

From a table position, open the knees out towards the edges of the mat and bring the big toes towards the center touching. With an exhalation, bring the buttocks back towards the heels and the forehead down to rest on earth or on stacked fists. Rest here for 2 minutes and breathe.



### Supported Twist

From a seated position, bend the knees and bring the feet to rest together as you sit over onto the right hip/buttock. Bring a bolster or stack of blankets to line up with the right hip. With an exhalation, turn the torso towards the bolster and gently lower the front of the body onto its support, turn the neck right and rest on the left cheek. Focus on the abdominal breath and hold 30 sec - 2 min.



Slowly lift and unwind the torso and take the twist for the same amount of time on the other side.

### Supported Reclining Hero

Come to standing on the knees and bring the buttocks to sit on the feet. Bring a bolster or blanket stack behind the body in line with the spine's trajectory as travels to the earth. Bring the hands behind the body to frame the bolster for support. With an exhalation, gently lower the spine to rest on the support of the bolster, continue breathing deeply hold 1 - 3 min. Use the arms to support the body when coming out of the pose. Release the legs long in front of the body for a couple of breaths before coming down onto the back.



### Legs Against the Wall

From a seated position, bring one hip to the wall and lay down the torso in a diagonal line away from the wall. Gently swing the legs around to the wall and position the body into an L shape



with the legs resting against the wall and the buttocks flush - if the buttocks won't come flush with the wall, use a folded blanket or firm pillow as support underneath the low back. Once the body and breath settle in, choose to keep the legs pointing directly up or open them into a v shape. Hold anywhere from 1 - 5 minutes. ▲