

Poses of the month

How to move from
Malasana to Kurmasana

By Gabriella Giubilaro

Malasana

mala = garland · asana = pose

Garland Pose



Benefit

Helps you find freedom and flexibility in your groins; lengthens your spine; creates overall balance and strength; quiets the mind

Instruction

- 1 Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) with your feet and legs together. Spread the soles and toes of both feet.
- 2 Keep your legs parallel while bending your knees and pressing your heels into the floor, maintaining even weight on both feet.
- 3 Once your knees are completely bent, spread them and move your chest forward between your thighs. Reach your arms and hands forward.
- 4 Move your side ribs forward then down, bringing your elbows closer to the floor.
- 5 Widen your arms and reach for your heels.
- 6 The tendency in Malasana is to have most of the weight in your outer feet, but make sure you maintain

the weight in the inner part, too. This will help you to keep the inward rotation of your thighs, bringing them closer to the side ribs. This is the main action to keep in mind in Malasana; it will help you to understand our peak pose, Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose). The compactness in Kurmasana starts from pressing the inner feet down. Starting the action in the feet releases tension in the groins.

- 7 The legs will be pressing into your ribs; counteract this pressure by inhaling to expand the ribs, collarbones, and chest. Hold here for a few breaths. Inhale to return to standing.

DON'T simultaneously spread your knees while bending your legs when first moving into the pose. To protect your knees from injury, first bend the legs, and *then* spread the knees.

DON'T stay in the pose if you feel pain in your knees or your groins.

OUR PROS Teacher Gabriella Giubilaro began practicing yoga in 1973 in Florence, Italy, with Dona Holleman. She has been to India many times to study directly with B.K.S. Iyengar, Geeta Iyengar, and Prashant Iyengar and she is the director of the Istituto Iyengar Yoga of Florence where she teaches regularly, in addition to her workshops worldwide. Model Laura Antelmi has studied for 29 years with Giubilaro, in addition to B.K.S. Iyengar and Geeta Iyengar. She owns the Iyengar Yoga Center of Boulder, in Colorado, and teaches workshops internationally.

Malasana

Malasana
modifications,
page 36

Kurmasana
prep,
pages 38–39

Kurmasana,
pages 40–41

Modify Malasana if needed to find safe alignment for your body.

If you experience knee pain ...

TRY using a prop to support the insides of your knees. Roll a blanket, towel, or sticky mat and place it in the crease of both knees (if you put it under just one knee, you will create imbalance in the pelvis and spine). As you lower into the pose, make sure the prop stays behind your knees. If your knees still hurt, try practicing with your lower back resting against a wall. Don't stay in the pose if your knees continue to hurt, even with the prop or wall.



If your heels do not stay on the ground ...

TRY elevating your heels, either on a wood wedge, or a rolled blanket or sticky mat. If your heels are lifted without support, your weight will move onto the fronts of the feet, which will harm the knee joints and can upset your balance. The support under your feet with the wedge or mat should feel stable. You know you have the right amount of support when you can bend your knees without falling forward.



If you are stiff in the groins and have trouble bending forward ...

TRY sitting on a low bench or crate. Make sure it's stable, bring the chest close to the thighs, then open the knees and extend the chest farther down. This will help you to relax the groins. You can modify the height accordingly for your leg length. Do not sit higher than you need to, but explore your limits. The idea is to remove tension from the groins.



TAKE A RETREAT

In yoga, we learn how to open and expand as well as how to go in and contract. These physical shapes also represent our ability to be extroverted and communicative, or introverted and solitary. Just as a tortoise withdraws its head and legs inside its shell, so too can the yoga practitioner withdraw his or her senses of perception. In Malasana and in our peak pose, Kurmasana, we can retreat from the overstimulating modern world by bringing the head lower than the chest, moving inward, and quieting the mind. The practice of withdrawing our senses, called *pratyahara*, is the first step in preparing our mind for meditation.

Open your hips and increase hamstring flexibility
and core strength in these **prep poses** for Kurmasana.

Akarna Dhanurasana

(Archer Pose)

Benefit

Improves leg-muscle flexibility so that the legs eventually feel lighter and hamstring- and hip-opening poses become effortless; contracts your abdominals

Instruction

Sit in Dandasana (Staff Pose) with your legs straight in front of you. Hold the big toe of your right foot with the index and middle fingers of your right hand—if this is difficult, use a belt. Then hold your left big toe the same way. Lift the left foot, bend your left leg, and take the leg and knee back as far as possible. The left elbow will extend back. Keep pressing through your inner left heel, but without tensing the foot. If your left foot is tense, your groins will become tense as well. The extension of the inner left heel will help the left thigh remain close to the chest and feel light. Hold here for a few deep breaths, then exhale to release. Repeat 3 to 4 times to create freedom in the hip joint. Do this on both sides.



Malasana,
page 35

Malasana
modifications,
page 36





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Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)

Benefit

Lengthens your spine; quiets your mind and cools your body

Instruction

Stand in Tadasana with your feet as wide as your hips. Lift the fronts of your thighs, from your knees to your pelvis, to relax your groins. Extend forward and down. Roll the backs of the thighs away from each other and open the backs of your knees. On an inhalation, spread your chest from the center to the sides, and let your side ribs extend down, away from your groins. Hold your ankles from the outsides and bend your elbows out to the sides. With an exhalation, fold deeper. Let your neck and the back of your head extend down, but lift your shoulders away from your ears. Hold for 1 minute, or as long as possible. Continue to breathe.



Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend)

Benefit

Teaches you how to freely move your pelvis forward and comfortably extend your spine; helps to cool the mind

Instruction

Sit with your legs straight in front of you and rotate the backs of your thighs away from each other, spreading your sitting bones. If your lower back is rounding, sit on a folded blanket. Lengthen your spine and chest away from your pelvis, then hold the outsides of your feet with your hands. If you can't hold your feet, use a strap. Once you have a grasp on your feet or the strap, spread the front ribs and take the side ribs forward. With an exhalation, extend farther forward from your hips. Bend and lift your elbows to spread the front of your chest even more and create space for your heart. Do not force the fold. Hold for 1 minute, or as long as possible. Do not hold the breath; instead, breathe normally.



Kurmasana
prep

Kurmasana,
pages 40–41

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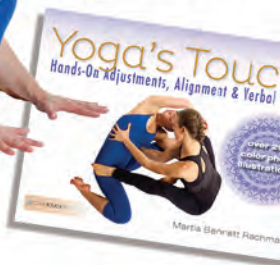
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Move inward and quiet your mind as you transition **step by step** into Kurmasana.

Benefit

Lengthens your spine; opens your shoulders; helps you withdraw your senses; quiets the mind in preparation for meditation

Instruction

- 1 Sit in Dandasana with your legs straight in front of you and your hands on the floor alongside your hips. Press your thighs into the floor, flex your feet, and lift your chest. Bring your legs to the edges of the mat, with your knees as wide as your shoulders. Take a few breaths here.
- 2 Bend your knees, and keeping your feet flexed, bring them closer to your hips. Extend your chest and arms forward and down between your legs.
- 3 Bend your legs even more, so that you can put your shoulders one by one under your knees. (If this is too difficult, continue to work on forward bends.) Once there, stretch your arms out to the sides. Roll your thighs inward and extend your inner heels, without creating tension in the feet. Spread the front of your chest and collarbones forward and down with the help of the pressure of your thighs on the shoulders or upper arms. Push your inner heels down and forward to stretch and straighten your legs. Your inner thighs should remain in contact with your side ribs.



Kurmasana

kurma = tortoise · asana = pose

Tortoise Pose



4 Inhale to continue to stretch your arms and chest out to your sides. Exhale to extend your spine farther forward. Do not force your legs; instead relax and exhale to release as far as you can into the pose. If you feel pain under your knees, take your arms slightly forward. Stay for a few breaths, then slowly come out of the pose. Repeat a few times.



LEARN MORE

For more step-by-step pose instruction, visit yogajournal.com/yogapedia

Stay safe

Practicing Kurmasana is the practice of respecting your own limitations. These limitations are different from day to day, so you need to continually observe your body and mind and make sure that you are not fighting against your limitations. To overcome them, work slowly, doing enough preparatory poses. On your way to Kurmasana, you can add more forward bends, and repeat if necessary. And it is OK if you never get to the full expression of the pose. Kurmasana teaches us tolerance and compassion for ourselves, as well as for others.