

8 Yoga Stretches To Do At Your Desk (+ 3 Bonus Stretches!)

Picture the scene – you've been sitting at your desk for the past couple of hours, and the last time you were on your feet was when you went to get a drink...um, how many hours ago? Your back is aching, your eyes are tired, and your feet are going to sleep where your legs were crossed (even though you've read enough about good posture when sitting at a desk to know you're not supposed to sit like that!).

The trouble is that many of us spend a large chunk of our day at a desk, and even with good intentions, you get absorbed in your work and it either doesn't enter your head to take a break or it seems a shame to interrupt your flow. We're all guilty of it!

So, when you stop for a moment to think what's next on your to-do list or to compose a tricky email, try one of the yoga stretches in this post. You'll feel so much better for it, and guess what? You don't even have to leave your desk... (I can't decide if that's a good thing or not!)

Safety Tips For Practising Yoga

Before we get into the exercises, we need to talk safety. FYI, this post is adapted from a magazine article that I wrote with guidance from my yoga teacher. She suggested the following safety tips for people new to yoga:

- Make sure the room is reasonably warm and there are no cold draughts that may affect your joints.
- Consult your doctor before doing any new forms of exercise, particularly if you have a heart condition. This blog post should not be considered medical advice!
- Sufferers of arthritis can benefit from yoga, but not in the middle of a flare-up.
- Know your limits. Anyone can do yoga, regardless of age, gender, fitness, and

flexibility levels, but the important thing is to work with your body and not expect to drop straight into the splits like you could when you were 15!

- Consider any injuries you're currently dealing with, and any stiffness from old injuries or accidents.
- Move slowly and smoothly to avoid jarring your muscles.
- Ease into the positions gently so you'll know if you're trying to push yourself too far. If you find yourself in pain, slowly come back out of the pose.

The Exercises

You can do these exercises in the order that they are listed for a decent stretch of your entire body, or you can pick out the ones you need most at a given moment (for example if you have tight shoulders or an aching back).

The photos of me doing all the exercises (even the obvious ones like the one below!) are available in another PDF in case you prefer to see it demonstrated rather than try and figure out what to do from the description. You may find you are less flexible than me, you may be more flexible than me – the important thing is that you listen to your body and DON'T push it if you're in pain.

Wrist Circles

Holding the arms so the elbows are bent at right angles, make the hands into fists and circle them. Repeat ten times and then rotate the hands in the other direction. Open and close the hands a few times, stretching the fingers apart when the hands are open.

Effects: Releases tension in the fingers, hands, and wrists.

Shoulder Rolls

Sit with a straight back and your hands on your thighs. Slowly rotate your shoulders from front to back, inhaling as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears and exhaling as you lower them down again. Repeat ten times in each direction.

Effects: Releases tension from long periods of time hunched at the computer.

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Half Moon

Sit with your back straight, your hands in your lap or on the arm rests of the chair, and your feet flat on the floor. As you inhale, slowly lift your left arm above your head with your palm facing inwards. Stretch your left hand up. As you exhale, reach your arm over to the right, making sure you look forward and keep the arm close to the side of the head. Breathe deeply, holding the pose for 20-30 seconds. Inhale as you come upright again and exhale as you lower your arm. Repeat with the right arm.

Effects: Opens the lungs and allows for deeper breathing whilst strengthening the core muscles.

Spinal Twist

If your chair has a flat back and no sides, sit on it sideways so that your right arm is parallel to the back. Make sure your feet are flat on the floor. Keep your back straight and look forward, concentrating on relaxing the shoulders. Turn towards the back of the chair and take hold of it with both hands, then inhale and lift your chest. As you exhale, turn the body so you are looking behind you but keep your feet flat on the floor. Turn your head as far as is comfortable and raise your right arm to shoulder height. Ensure the shoulders and face are relaxed, and hold for five to ten breaths before exhaling and releasing the stretch. Repeat on the other side.

Effects: Opens the chest, lengthens the spine and releases tension in the neck and shoulders. Also allows deeper breathing, which helps to improve the mood.

NOTE: If your neck is stiff, you may not be able to turn your head the whole way. Be sure to turn only as far as is comfortable.

Forward Bend

Sit upright with your back straight, your feet flat on the floor and your knees slightly apart. As you inhale, lengthen your spine by sitting up as tall as you can. Exhaling, sink forward over your legs, bending at the waist. Let yourself hang there for 10-30 seconds, with your head between your knees and your arms hanging loose towards the floor. Inhale as you slowly come upright.

Effects: Increases the flow of blood to the brain, with the oxygen boost improving mood

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and alertness. Also relaxes the shoulders.

NOTE: Be careful if you have high/low blood pressure.

Cat to Cow

Sit with your back straight, your feet flat, and your hands on your thighs. As you exhale, look down at your legs, slide the hands forward and curve your spine, pushing your navel and spine towards the back of the chair as far as possible. Inhale and look up towards the ceiling, pushing your chest forward to curve your spine away from the chair back. Move with your breath for as many repetitions as you like.

Effects: Counteracts bad posture and helps to keep the spine supple.

Butterfly

Sit tall with your shoulders relaxed. As you inhale, raise your right leg and bend it to rest your right ankle across your left knee. Exhale and draw your right knee down towards the floor a little so that you can feel a stretch in your groin and inner thigh. Don't push the knee down with your hands. Keep your back straight and draw yourself up a little taller with each inhale. Breathe in this position for around a minute. Exhale as you release your right leg. Repeat with the left leg.

Effects: A lot of time at a desk can result in tight hips, and this pose is fantastic for remedying that.

Leg Raises

Start with your feet flat on the floor and slightly apart. As you inhale, lift one leg up from the knee down, ideally so that it is parallel with the floor (but only lift it as high as is comfortable for you). Exhale as you lower the leg. Repeat 2-5 times before switching to the other leg.

Effects: Strengthens the muscles in the midsection, back and thighs.

Bonus Stretches

Arm Circles

Hold the arms at shoulder height and move so the hands are tracing small circles in the air. Do this for a minute or two, depending on how you feel. Stop, then rotate the arms in the other direction for the same amount of time.

Effects: Strengthens the shoulders.

Tiger

Clasp your hands around your right shin. As you exhale, lift your right knee towards your forehead. Don't hunch over too much; there should be a slight curve in the spine but it doesn't matter if your knee and forehead don't touch. Inhale and release your leg back down to the floor. Repeat 3-6 more times with the right leg, then switch to the left leg and repeat.

Effects: Helps to stretch the neck and spine, and strengthens the muscles in the back.

Twisting Chair

Sit upright in your chair with your feet flat on the floor, close together or with a small gap between. Inhale and bring your hands to your chest, pressing them together in prayer position. As you exhale, lean forward to lengthen the spine and twist to the right. Rotate your spine, upper body, and shoulders until your left elbow is on the outside of your right thigh. Look up towards the ceiling and breath deeply. Each time you exhale, come a little deeper into the stretch. Hold for 10-30 seconds. Inhale as you untwist, before repeating on the other side.

Effects: Lengthens and twists the spine, releases tension from the shoulders, and opens the lungs.

NOTE: Only do this if you are comfortable with the spinal twist above. If you have back issues, it might be best to skip this one.