



Photo: John Richards

BACKPACKING YOGA

BY ANNE RICHARDS

Serious hiking can produce tight hamstrings, calves and Achilles tendons, not to mention backpacker's revenge in the shoulders, neck, lower back, feet, and ankles. Most walkers are conditioned to live with the concept that aches and pains are a necessary evil. However, a "relaxed" approach exists to vanquish unforgiving muscles and frazzled tissues, and deserves consideration: "backpacker's yoga."

After instructing yoga in Aspen, Colorado for seven years, I realized that many physically-oriented people often give an astonishing amount of resistance when it comes to accepting the notion of a "passive" approach to fitness. I sympathize, being also very active in sports (ski racing, surfing, hiking and camping) and would like to interject that these people don't know what they are missing.

Many of my yoga students are avid, well-conditioned hikers and skiers. Together we field-tested a simple program of yoga stretches coupled with deep, yogic breathing, specifically designed to eliminate muscle kinks and hiker's hangover. Each of my "test

cases" has later testified that they'd reached peak levels of stamina and fatigue-free activity as never before. My husband, my eight-year-old child and I religiously practice this program out on the trail, and prize the results.

The key to backpacker's yoga is that each movement is aimed directly at the particular body part which knots up under a heavy pack or after a long day's walk. It gets best results when practiced upon first reaching camp or just before sacking out. The exercises are good warm-ups before starting hiking in the morning and give instant relief during the rest stops.

The entire program can be completed in about seven minutes or can be prolonged for deep relaxation and sensuous stretching. It should also take place on an empty stomach, in loose-fitting clothing, with boots off, and on level ground. An Ensolite ground pad makes an excellent yoga mat, offering support and protection from bumpy ground or scratchy vegetation.

Each yoga stretch described here is a precision technique. If done halfheartedly or carelessly, too quickly or too strenuously, the stretches are rob-

bed of their full results. In yoga stretching, the muscles and ligaments are gently guided back into their natural, elongated state. Stiffness and fatigue dissolve.

Proper Breathing

The first step in the practice of backpacker's yoga is a basic understanding of the function and method of breathing. Every activity of life is bound up in the breathing processes. Without oxygen, there can be no life. Since cells depend upon blood for their oxygen, we must breathe correctly to bring oxygen to every cell.

The supply of oxygen is only one aspect of the breathing function. Cells also discharge carbon dioxide and other energy-sapping wastes into the blood, which the lungs then purify with oxygen. If the blood stream runs short of oxygen through shallow or precipitous breathing and is filled with carbon dioxide, the vitality of every cell in the body is diminished.

Physical exercise alone does not yield as much hygienic advantage as it does when performed with proper breathing. Muscles become fatigued

when they are made to repeat a movement many times. This "fatigue" then generates chemical substances, primarily lactic acid, which act as poison to the bloodstream, decreasing stamina and muscle power. If oxygen-bearing blood is rhythmically pumped out to the muscles and the internal organs via proper breathing, they will not tire because lactic acid will be less likely to form.

Complete yogic breathing incorporates in one full rhythmic action the three various types of partial breathing:

Abdominal breathing is induced by lowering and flattening the diaphragm and relaxing the abdomen.

Intercostal breathing is brought about by expanding the ribs.

Clavicular breathing, from the top of the lungs, is produced by raising the upper part of the thoracic cage.

Yogic breathing is learned best while lying on your back with knees slightly bent and the small of the back pressed toward the ground: Arms are alongside the body and palms are turned upward. It can also be practiced while sitting or standing, spine erect without tension, palms turned forward.

To begin, exhale and empty the lungs entirely. Then . . .

- Relax the abdomen and slowly lower the diaphragm allowing air to enter the lungs.
- When the abdomen swells, filling the bottom of the lungs with air, expand the ribs without straining.
- Allow the lungs to fill completely by raising the collarbone slightly.

Throughout the procedure, the air should enter in a continuous flow without gasping. Ideally, no noise is made. When the lungs are completely filled, breathe out slowly and in the opposite sequence as for the inhalation . . . first relaxing the collarbone . . . then allowing the rib cage to contract . . . and lastly contracting the abdomen, forcing out every bit of stale air. Continue with the next breath, breathing in as before. Repeat for eight to ten cycles. As you progress, you may repeat as many cycles as feel comfortable.

During the exhalation, effort should be made to contract the lungs fully. In yoga, importance is always placed on exhalation and the complete emptying of the lungs. When the lungs have been emptied in this manner, they will dilate themselves by a simple reflex to their full, normal extent at the time of inhalation unless faulty posture prevents them from doing so.

Allow the inhalation to take place naturally and do not attempt to blow yourself up like a balloon. Breathe in

easily and steadily without straining, silently and slowly.

It is of utmost importance to concentrate the mind entirely upon the action of breathing. Use visualization if you like, imagining, feeling, and sensing the diaphragm moving up and down like a powerful piston.

Always breathe through the nose. To breathe through the mouth does not allow a normal aeration of the lungs and depletes oxygen. The advanced yoga practitioner is able to do so even during heavy exertion.

Breathe slowly. Prolonged deep breathing increases the efficiency of the respiratory system. Fatigue is reduced to a minimum when the normally inactive alveoli, unused in everyday breathing, are brought into service.

Each inhalation and exhalation should last for the same number of seconds according to individual rhythm and capacity, usually eight to ten seconds for beginners.

Exercise 1 Dog Stretches

This is a two-position stretch for the "dog-tired" backpacker. The after-effect of the combined stretches is highly exhilarating. The first stretch (head-up) rejuvenates the entire spine and is especially good for dissolving spinal rigidity, upper body tension, and muscle cramp. The second movement (head-down) revitalizes the body and removes fatigue from tired legs

and ankles. The abdominal muscles and spine are strengthened; the heart beat slows down, and weary brain cells are rejuvenated.

- Lie on your insolate yoga mat face down, feet a foot apart and extended out (tops of the feet on the mat), palms on the ground alongside the waist, fingertips pointed toward the head.
- Inhale and simultaneously arch the back, the head, then the trunk. Lastly, straighten arms and lock elbows.
- Straighten legs and tighten kneecaps. Do not allow the knees to rest on the ground. For fullest effect, contract the buttocks and extend or arch the head and neck back as far as possible.
- Hold the pose for three to five slow but deep breaths. As your comfort level and endurance increase, maintain the stretch for six to ten deep breaths.

To move from Pose of a Dog Head-Up to Head-Down, it is necessary to:

- Step the toes under (forming a right angle between foot and shin).
- Exhale deeply and simultaneously, bend at the hips, push up the buttocks, straighten the arms and lock the elbows, thereby forming a human triangle.
- Press the chin in toward the base of the throat.
- Inch the feet forward so that the heels can be pushed to the ground.
- Hold the pose for three to five deep, even breaths. By increased practice, you can gradually work up to six to ten breaths.



Dog-Stretch Head-Up. The first stretch rejuvenates the entire spine and is especially good for dissolving spinal rigidity, upper body tension and muscle cramp. Arms should be straight and hands and shoulder muscles at work. Chin pushed out, heels skyward.

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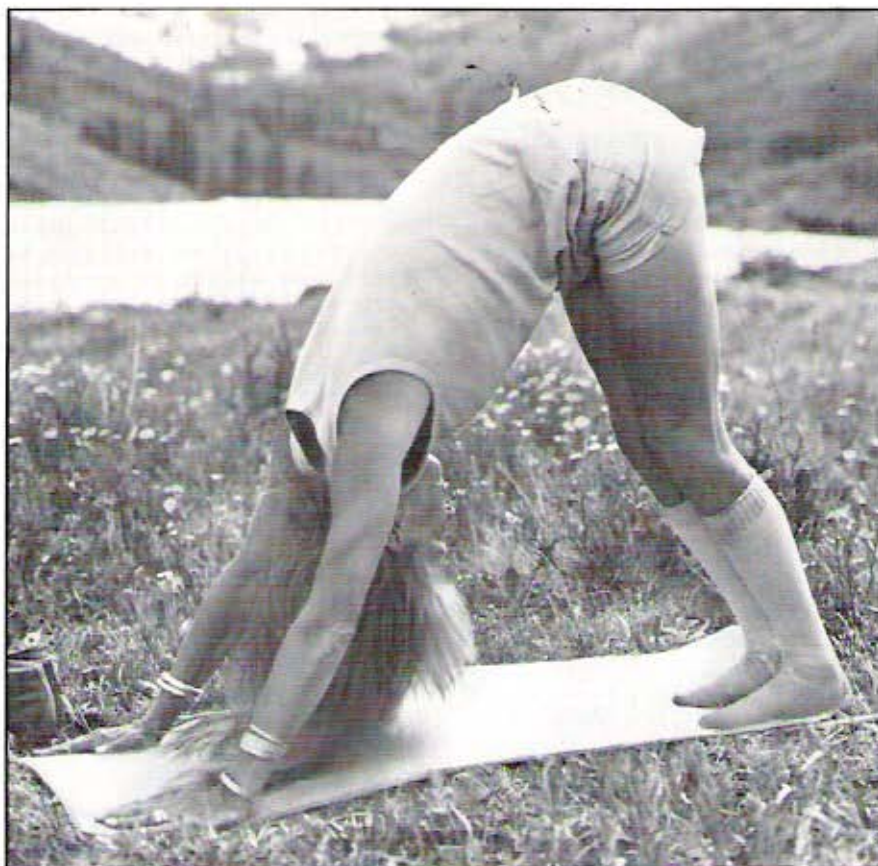


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Dog-Stretch Head-Down. The second movement revitalizes the body and removes fatigue from tired legs and ankles. Chin should be tucked in and the heels pressed downwards.

- Extend the head and trunk forward and lower the body to the ground. Relaxation follows.

Exercise 2 Neck Rolls

Every backpacker has experienced the Gordian Knot which invariably appears at the scruff of the neck after a long day's pack trip. A few simple neck rolls or cervical stretches relieve tension, increase circulation in the neck and shoulder area, and permit free movement of muscles that have gone into a temporary deep freeze.

- Sit or stand with the spine held "erect" (spinal vertebrae in balance; back muscles relaxed). Close the eyes and permit the neck and head to hang forward heavily, feeling the weight of the head and the gentle pull of gravity.
- Inhale slowly and simultaneously propel the head and neck gently clockwise toward the right shoulder. Continue to inhale and allow the head and neck to circle past the shoulder and to rotate loosely towards the back.
- Exhale at the halfway point in the circle (mid-back) and simultaneously rotate the head and neck toward the left shoulder, then forwards returning

to the starting point with the head hanging limply down at the chest.

- Repeat five times or more, and then reverse the process in a counterclockwise direction.

WARNING: The head should never be swung about quickly or vigorously in an attempt to wrench out stiffness. Each rotation should move at the same pace as your slowest, deepest respiration. When encountering a trouble spot or kinky area, move even more carefully. Consciously explore the area of tightness. Visualize sending the breath directly into the afflicted area. Try to keep the trunk straight and not to lift the shoulders.

Exercise 3 Ankle Rolls

- With boots off, balance on one leg and raise the opposite leg about six inches from the ground, extending it forward a little. You may also sit comfortably on a rock or log which is high enough to let the legs hang down.
- Use one yogic breath for each rotation and resist the temptation to move the ankle and foot quickly.
- Point the foot downward.

- Inhale slowly and at the same time draw a large clockwise circle to the left from six o'clock to twelve o'clock with the foot.
- Exhale and continue to circle the foot to the right and back down.
- Attempt to stretch and flex the toes in the upper reaches of the circle and to point the toes downward in the lower half of the circle.
- Repeat for five or more yogic breaths and then reverse the direction of the circles counterclockwise, inhaling as the foot comes up and exhaling as it circles down.
- Switch feet and repeat.

Exercise 4 Shoulder Rolls

- Sit or stand with the spine held erect.
- Close the eyes.
- Use only *one* yogic breath for each rotation.
- Inhale and simultaneously press the shoulders forward and toward each other, as if you could make the shoulder bones touch in front of the chest. Still inhaling, rotate the shoulders toward the ears.
- Exhale and at the same time press the shoulders back (shoulder blades pressing together) and then down to the original position.
- The arms and hands should remain as limp and relaxed as possible. Each rotation should "follow" the slow, even rhythm of the breath as in the neck rolls.
- After five or more rotations, reverse the process five or more times, first inhaling the shoulders back and up towards the ears, then exhaling them forward and down to complete the circle.

Deep Relaxing

Yoga recognizes that deep relaxation between postures is essential to receive the full benefit of the previous stretch. The method is simple.

- First, position the body correctly: Lie on your back, legs separated, feet a foot apart, arms a few inches from the sides with the palms turned upward, face up, eyes closed, jaws relaxed. Give the limbs and neck a gentle roll to assure limpness.
- Next, allow the abdominal region to become loose and flexible. Start to breathe yogically, the abdomen raising slightly with the inhalation and lowering with each exhalation. If the breath is full and deep, the rib cage and upper chest will also expand considerably with each in-breath and lower with each out-breath. Never "flex" the abdomen in an attempt to mock abdominal expansion; this creates muscle ten-

sion rather than relaxation.

- Send the breath to any stubborn body parts that refuse to let go and consciously coax them to "release and relax." Imagine the entire body as getting heavier and heavier. Feel the pull of gravity and give your body weight up to it. When a total sense of relaxation overcomes you, either begin the next exercise or savor this delectable state.

To come up to a seated position from the pose of relaxation:

- Bring the legs together and raise the arms above the head, placing them on the ground.
- Press the small of the back and the back of the neck into the mat.
- Inhale deeply.
- Exhaling, raise up the arms and the head, then bring the head toward the chest, roll up the shoulders and chest, and lastly, roll up the lower trunk, coming to a seated position. Be careful to keep the small of the back and the back of the neck from arching upward, which causes back strain.

Exercise 5 The Forward Bend

There are many variations of the seated forward bend, but one of the most useful adaptations for the backpacker is done with the legs extended forward and held closely together. This move stretches the entire leg, particularly the hamstrings. It relieves sciatica and lower back pains, elongates the spine, creates elasticity, and works on the shoulder and upper back area. It is the most powerful of the forward bends and should be performed with care and gentleness.

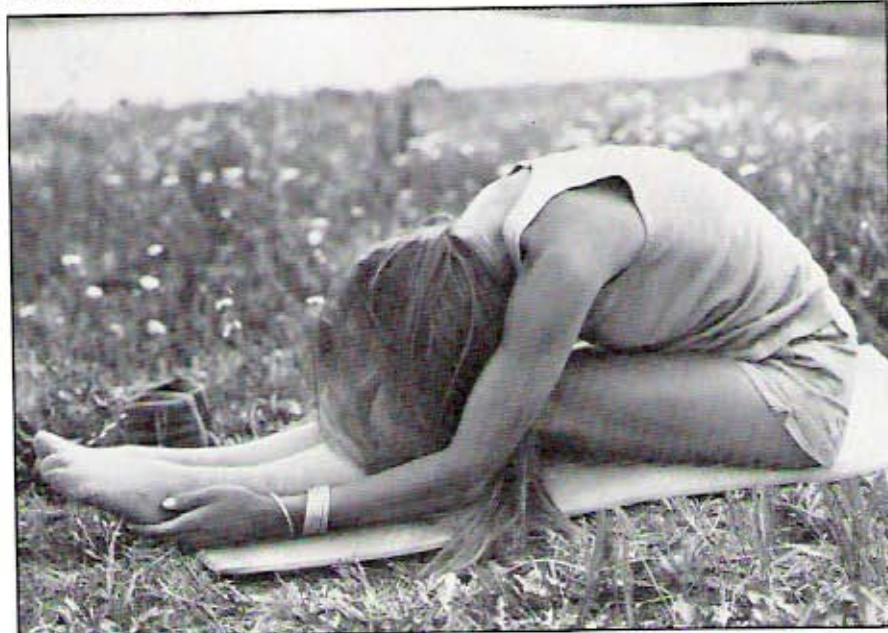
- Seated on your mat, draw both legs tightly together, with ankles, knees and thighs touching. Remember to keep the legs straight, without tension, throughout the stretch.
- Hook the thumbs together, inhale, and stretch the arms upward toward the sky. Look up and extend the spine fully.
- Exhale deeply as you bend forward from the hip joint and extend the trunk out over the legs. Unhook the thumbs and reach out with the arms, making hand contact with the legs anywhere from the knee to the big toe, depending on flexibility. Remember not to yank the muscles into extension and not to rely on muscle power in order to draw yourself downward. Force only creates a "reverse" reaction and the muscles tend to jerk back, shorten, and resist stubbornly. Relax! Go wherever your forward bending capacity takes you and work with the breath. On each

exhalation try to experience a sense of conscious release, testing the tight areas, and bit by bit, easing into your maximum stretch.

- Remain in the position from one to three minutes (longer if you have practiced forward bending recently) or as your endurance level builds up.
- Inhale yourself up, hooking the thumbs as before, and stretching up, extending the spine. Then, lower the arms, place the palms on the knees,

round out the back, and unfold slowly back to the position of rest. Begin another period of deep relaxation on the back. Ten minutes is ideal, but an all-out one-minute session will do if you feel pressed for time.

I'd say no hiker should leave home without carrying along a knowledge of backpacker's yoga, any more than he should leave without proper equipment, substantial grits and a well-chosen pair of boots. ♣



Forward bends should be practiced with deep even breathing, concentration and without force. Legs are extended forward and held closely together.

Photo: John Richards



A variation of the seated forward bend, tuck one leg close to the torso and extend the other. This position offers a slightly different stretch and release than the version with the legs held together.