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A sequence to strengthen your abdominal muscles and support your lower back.

While you're reading this, draw your navel back towards your spine, lift your chest and take your shoulders back. Feel better? Your posture will have improved too.



What you have just done is to lift your lower abdomen up and draw it closer to your spine. This lengthens your lower back down, and by leveling your pelvis, puts the weight of the abdomen back into the 'bowl' of the pelvis, where it belongs, instead of dropping forwards and dragging on your lower back.

Lifting your chest and taking your shoulders back creates space around the front and back of your abdomen, keeping this girdle of muscles firm, and of course relieving the pressure on your digestive organs.

This short routine will also help to strengthen the muscles around the front and back of your abdomen, your postural 'corset'. It helps to 'switch on' the deeper abdominal muscles, most important for protecting your lower back.

You will need a mat, a chair, a yoga block, a strap and a folded blanket.



Urdhva hastasana

Sit on the edge of your chair, feet and knees together. Link your fingers in front of you and stretch your arms forward, backs of your hands facing you. Feel the skin of your palms stretch and open. Inhale and slowly lift your arms straight up, keeping your navel back towards your spine and lifting your chest. Feel the skin stretch from the outer hips up the sides of your body to your armpits. Keep your chin up and head back. As you exhale, slowly lower your arms. Change the link of your fingers and repeat.





Bharadvajasana

Sit sideways on the chair, feet flat on the floor and knees pressed together, with the back of the chair to your right. (If your feet don't reach the floor, place a block under your feet.) Keeping your knees and hips steady, draw your navel towards your spine, turn your trunk towards the back of the chair and hold with both hands. Keeping your knees and thighs together, push gently with the right hand and pull with the left, so your trunk turns and your spine revolves to the right. Keep your shoulders level, breathe steadily, and keep your chin in line with your breastbone. Hold for 3 breaths. Slowly turn to the front and pause for a breath. Swivel round on the seat so the back of the chair is now on your left. Come back to the centre and repeat to the right and left once more, pausing between each twist.

Do these twists slowly and use your exhalations to help you turn a little more, tucking your shoulder blades in and keeping your shoulders level.

Navasana

Face the seat of your chair. One at a time, lift your legs and place your heels on the seat, holding a strap round the soles of your feet. Begin to straighten your legs. Tighten your kneecaps and extend the backs of your legs, pushing your heels away and pulling on the strap with your hands. This will help you to lift your chest, waist and lower back away from the floor. Keep your head, neck and face relaxed. Breathing evenly and smoothly, hold for 3-5 breaths. Relax the pose, bring your feet down if you need to, then repeat twice more, rolling your shoulders back as you lift your chest. Try to perch on your buttock bones!



Jathara Parvatasana

Move the chair aside and lie down on your mat. Bring your knees up over your chest again, and push gently into your heels to help keep your legs firm, your feet and knees together. Place your arms on the floor, straight out at shoulder height, backs of the hands to the floor. Keeping your knees in line take them slowly down towards the floor on your right - they may not go all the way down - and slowly back up again. As you turn to one side, you need to stretch and open the opposite ribs and waist and try to keep both shoulders on the floor. This takes time and gets a little better with each repetition so don't rush it.

Repeat over to the left, keeping a slow and steady rhythm to the movement and the breathing. Keep your face and jaw



relaxed. Do this three times on each side then put your feet hip width apart on the floor, knees bent and together as before and rest. Repeat for three each side again.

Urdhva Prasarita Padasana

Lie down on your mat with your knees bent up. Lift your hips and put a yoga block under your sacrum – this is the hard bone at the back of your pelvis, between your tailbone and your waist. (Have a look at the picture.) Bend your knees over your chest and put a strap over the balls of your feet, holding one end in each hand. Breathe in. As you breathe out push your heels up towards the ceiling, keeping your feet together and aiming to straighten your legs. Hold this 'L' shape for 2-3 breaths, then bring your knees back down to your chest on an exhalation. Rest for 2 breaths.

Repeat this three times. Finally put your feet down on the floor hip-width apart, knees bent and together, to allow your abdominal muscles to rest.

Lift your hips and slide the block out. Rest your back on the mat for 2 breaths.

If you find it difficult to straighten your legs, take your legs and feet further away from your face by using a longer strap. Experiment until you find an angle at which your legs feel comfortably straight.



Savasana - To finish, lie with your back on the floor and your legs resting over the seat of the chair. (Put the chair sideways so you have room for your feet.) The edge of the seat should come right into the backs of your knees, so your calves rest completely on the seat. If you are less than 5'6" you might be more comfortable with a yoga block under your sacrum, as before. If you are over 5'9", you will find a well folded blanket on the chair seat more comfortable. Stay

resting for 2-3 minutes, breathing normally.

It is helpful to consider the connection between the front and back of your lower body. It is very important to keep your abdominal muscles in good shape as they form a girdle of support in all directions, and stop the weight of your abdomen pulling on the internal muscles of your lower back. Think about 'lifting up your front and drawing down your back', then roll your shoulders back and tuck your shoulder blades in. This draws your abdomen back into its natural position, bringing your navel closer to your spine and lengthening your lower back down.

And finally, keep your thigh muscles strong and use them – they should be taking the weight, not your lower back.