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Yoga for Runners

By Nicole Kwan

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Five essential routines for strength and flexibility



This might sound a bit counter-intuitive, but improving your running skills might require moving slowly and deliberately. Athletes of all sorts have discovered that yoga is the perfect cross-training tool. Stretches and poses will make you feel better when you run by loosening you up all over. In time yoga can help you tap into energy you didn't know you had. Suddenly you are effortlessly running longer, recovering faster, and racing injury-free.

We took the most common running goals and asked the experts to target yoga routines that will help meet those goals.

1. YOU WANT: Total-body fitness (not just legs)

YOU NEED: Upper-body strength

Running motions lead to very tight necks, shoulders, hamstrings, and hips. "Yoga brings more movement into your body, much more movement in the hips, and a more relaxed face and shoulders [than when running]," says Barbara Ruzansky, owner of West Hartford Yoga in West Hartford, Connecticut. Yoga will also help develop your upper body to balance your already strong legs. Try the following pose to take the stress off your legs and build strength in your arms. If anyone asks, you're practicing your slide-between-walls spy move.

TRY THIS: Side Arm Balance pose

This beginner version will help develop upper-body strength and awareness while also working abs, says Sandy Blaine, codirector of the Alameda Yoga Station in Alameda, California. Start in full **Plank** pose. Lying face-down, smoothly push your body off the ground just 2 to 3 inches and hold it there, palms flat, elbows squeezing tightly toward one another. Make sure your belly is in and each muscle is engaged. Then turn so the right side of your body faces the ground and your left side faces the

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ceiling. As you turn, bring your left hand to rest on your left hip so you rest on your right hand. Bend your left leg, placing your left foot flat on the floor in front of the right knee. The goal is to push the right leg away from the floor and not sink into the floor. Hold for 15-30 seconds. Then switch to the left. A strength move like this is best done 2-3 times a week to see improvement.

2. YOU WANT: Pain-free running

YOU NEED: Increased strength and flexibility

Yoga will eliminate tightness that leads to pain by opening up your joints. But remember, safety first. "The tighter people are, the safer they need to be; especially with runners, who tend to be goal oriented," says Christine Felstead, owner of Yoga for Runners in Toronto. "The muscles you use for running are strong but you don't use all your muscles. A yoga pose requires all the muscles work in tandem."

TRY THIS: Sit cross-legged

Sit in this pose after a run. "Sitting cross-legged is the simplest way to start opening up hips and increase the lateral (outward) rotation of your hip joint," Felstead says. Make sure your hips are higher than your knees when you sit. To balance hips and knees, sit on a rolled-up towel, block, or phone book. After a while you may feel fatigue in your spine but engaging your abs will add some core work while you stretch the arches of your feet, ankles, knees, and quads. Sit for as long as you feel relaxed and be sure to switch the foot that's in front every few minutes. You might stay there for only 3 minutes to start but you'll be able to sit longer over time, Felstead says.

3. YOU WANT: Injury prevention

YOU NEED: Perfect posture

"If you run and don't do anything to maintain flexibility, chances are almost 100 percent that you'll end up with a running injury sooner or later. It's just critical to maintain a range of motion and stretch out the muscles that get tight from running," says Beryl Bender Birch, owner/director of The Hard & The Soft Yoga Institute in East Hampton, New York. Besides helping you avoid injury, that extra flexibility and movement makes for a better time in the bedroom, so stand up—you'll look taller, too.

TRY THIS: Mountain pose

This simple but challenging stance will create better awareness of your body and improve your posture. Stand against a wall to find your postural alignment. This means you've got to properly line up your body to the wall, which is harder than it seems. Bring your heels to the wall and tuck your chin slightly under. You'll have two pockets of space at lower back and neck where your body does not touch the wall. Stretch your body gently upwards; you should feel taller. Then step away and try to maintain your posture. By straightening your spine away from your lower back you lengthen your body, avoid shoulder pain, and keep your joints healthy. Apply this posture when you're waiting to cross the street or to pay in the checkout line or anytime you find yourself slouching (like now). Straighten up!

4. YOU WANT: Agility

YOU NEED: Correct stretching

You stretch before you run, but practicing a few yoga poses post-run when your muscles are warm will make you feel a whole lot better the next day. "Think of yoga like a clay pot, if you just try to bend it, it will break. If you add warmth, you can bend into anything. When it relaxes and cools off it stays in shape," says Mark Blanchard, founder of Mark Blanchard's Power Yoga Centers. You actually strengthen muscles by making them soft. "The definition of health in a muscle is not hardness. Even though a muscle may feel hard it's actually weak," says Jean Couch,

owner and director of The Balance Center in Palo Alto, California. Tense muscles don't receive blood, so use yoga after you run to keep your muscles open for movement-enabling oxygen.

TRY THIS: Reclined leg stretch

Lie down with your right foot through a doorway and left leg against the wall. Your legs should be extended but knees shouldn't be locked. Hold for 5-10 full breaths for a good stretch into your hamstrings, says Sandra Safadirazieli, instructor at the Piedmont Yoga Institute in Berkeley, California. As you loosen up, bring your upper body closer and closer to the door until you can put a strap around your foot for a stronger stretch. If you don't have a strap, use a belt or sturdy scarf. The ultimate goal is to hold on to the big toe with your second and third fingers, but work your way up slowly.

5. YOU WANT: Faster recovery

YOU NEED: Consistent yoga practice

Yoga can help you recover faster by preventing a buildup in scar tissue. "Yoga uses the elastics of the body and breathing to move oxygen, which moves scar tissue so it doesn't coagulate and settle in one spot," says Blanchard. He recommends alternating days of running and yoga but practicing Sun Salutation every day. This flow makes for a good pre-run warmup to energize and focus your mind and body, but don't cheat—it's not a substitute for a regular yoga routine. The entire thing will take 15 to 20 minutes but work at your own pace and follow your breath.

Watch our video to learn **Sun Salutation**, the total body workout.

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