



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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Strengthen Your Upper Body, Arms and Shoulders

Most women who come to yoga want stronger, more toned, shapelier arms. They may have tried everything from weight lifting to aerobic classes, but their arms have remained relatively weak, thin, and undefined. Yoga will really help to shape up and strengthen the arms. Strong arms do much more than allow you to wear sleeveless tops with confidence. They make the rest of your life easier, by enabling you to lift and carry things like groceries, babies, packages, etc without strain. This applies to both men and women of course. Men are naturally stronger than women but yoga helps to increase their strength and to alleviate problems in the arms and wrists.

Anatomy of Arm Strength

Many large and small muscles help you curl your fingers, move your hands, flex your wrists, extend your elbows, and lift your arms. For everyday activities, three of the most important are the biceps, the triceps, and the deltoids. The biceps run along the front of the upper arms and are responsible for bending the elbows. The triceps, along the backs of the upper arms, extend the elbows to straighten the arms. The deltoids, which form the outer layer of the upper arms where they meet the shoulders, lift the arms to the sides; they also help lift the arms to the front, extend the arms behind, and rotate the arms inward and outward.

How Yoga Helps to Strengthen our Arms and Shoulders

Yoga can tone and sculpt the arms as effectively as traditional weight training. Just about any yoga posture in which you place your palms on the floor and use them as a foundation to support your body weight strengthens your arms and shoulders. Standing postures in which the arms must work to resist the downward pull of gravity develop arm strength as well. When you hold postures in yoga, you strengthen your muscles mostly through what's known as isometric work; that means the muscle is activated but its length remains the same. Isometric work builds the kind of muscle endurance that helps you hold a child in your arms as you wait for the traffic to cease. In standing postures, concentrate on keeping your arms firm and straight, reaching out expansively.

Give Yourself Time

Although arm-strengthening exercises can be challenging, your body will grow stronger over time, regardless of your fitness level or age. It is always possible to modify traditional arm-strengthening postures to match the ability of any student. You can learn how to move from modified versions to the complete posture. By working at it slowly and progressively you will find you can do things you could never have done before.

Practice postures such as plank, side plank, downward dog and upward dog to build upper body strength. When you get stronger you can progress to handstands or headstands that require greater upper body strength.

The key to progressively building strength is to practice at home a few times a week, and to include a posture or variation that challenges your weaker areas. Change your practice from day to day including arm-strengthening postures on one day followed by standing postures the next. You will notice the benefits if you practice yoga for only fifteen minutes a few times a week.

Posture of the Month

Dolphin Plank

This is not one of the classic yoga postures but it is hugely beneficial for strengthening the upper body, arms and shoulders.

Technique

1. Start in Dolphin Posture. Rest on your forearms with your arms parallel, elbows not pointing out to the sides. Your knees are bent and resting on the mat hip-width part. Slowly straighten your legs and walk your feet a little way towards your elbows. Stay here for three breaths.
2. Then walk your feet back until your shoulders are directly over the elbows and your torso is parallel to the floor. You are now resting on your toes and forearms only.
3. Press your inner forearms and elbows firmly against the floor. Firm your shoulder blades against your back and spread them away from the spine. Similarly spread your collarbones away from the sternum.
4. Push into your toes and strengthen your legs by pulling up the quadriceps muscles. Make sure you are not pushing up your tailbone, but keep your body parallel to the floor.
5. Lift the base of your skull away from the back of the neck and look straight down at the floor, keeping the throat and eyes soft.
6. Stay in this posture anywhere from thirty seconds to a minute. As soon as you feel any stress, come out of the posture.
7. To come out, lower your knees to the floor on an exhalation.

Contraindications and Cautions

If you have any shoulder injuries, support your torso on a bolster.

If you have any neck injuries, support your forehead on a block.

Beginner's Tip

Relieve any neck tension by resting your forehead on a block set between your forearms.

Preparatory Posture

Practice full plank posture to build strength in the arms.

Benefits of this posture

- Calms the brain and helps relieve stress and mild depression
- Stretches the shoulders, hamstrings, calves, and arches
- Strengthens the arms and legs, and core
- Helps prevent osteoporosis
- Relieves headache, insomnia, back pain and fatigue
- Therapeutic for high blood pressure, asthma, flat feet and sciatica.



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