



Teaching Shoulderstand

with Todd Jackson

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Sarangasana benefits

Shoulderstand brings tremendous restorative agency to the mind, emotions, organs, glands and musculo-skeletal system.

The feet are given a moment to receive chi from the heavens, without being asked to carry the weight of our form. They are typically tasked with bearing all our bodyweight and drawing in earth chi. Sarvangasana gives them a much needed change of perspective.

It relieves and refreshes the legs and hips by inverting them, draining them of cellular byproducts. Sarvangasana affords the legs an opportunity to experience decreased pressure and demand relative to their typical role of supporting the torso's weight. Students who stand on their feet for work, or who engage in demanding physical leg activity will find shoulderstand a boon to their recovery rate. They will feel refreshed more quickly by taking shoulderstand after a long shift or training vigorously.

Sarvangasana assists those who experience digestive discomforts too. The intestines fall away from the pelvic floor while in the pose, stimulating healthy processing and calming irritation at the same time. The pressures are taken off the intestines while they are repositioned within the torso.

As the intestines rest upon the diaphragm, the respiratory diaphragm receives their weight and begins to relax, similar to the way a hammock spreads when we settle into it. As the diaphragm is eased by accepting the weight of the intestines, this stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system via the relaxation at the solar plexus, thereby amplifying healthful intestinal processing.

The kidneys and adrenals become soothed by the inversion combined with its parasympathetic emphasis. The ovaries, testes, uterus, and prostate similarly receive a sense of levity and a relaxed space in which to discover improved functioning.

The position of the arms helps to open the pectorals and heart center, stimulating the immune response and catalyzing contentment in the heart.

Anxiety and tension become dissolved by sarvangasana's shoulder position and applied pressures. Anxious tension between the ears and the shoulders becomes relieved and soothed by the bodyweight passing through through the upper back where it meets the shoulders.

The neck position gently squeezes the thyroid and parathyroid glands, massaging them towards improved functioning. The neck position also soothes the nerves which supply the thyroid and parathyroids, helping them to deeply relax while being massaged. As a result, the metabolic system becomes robust.

With the back of the head on the floor and the neck in flexion, the brainstem receives relief, providing an incredibly potent central nervous system shift towards ease and improved regulation.

The eyes, ears, sinuses and throat become flooded with blood and prana. The inverted position brings the life force to these areas, while they are being dilated from the tremendous ease sarvangasana brings to the central nervous system.

The pineal and pituitary glands, which help to regulate the endocrine system and emotional body, are bathed in bioenergy and stimulated to upregulate tissue repair and renewal.

Sarvangasana risks

While the benefits of shoulderstand are manifold, there are some special considerations when sharing the pose in a public class or presenting it during private instruction with special populations.

High blood pressure

If a student has high blood pressure, being inverted will increase blood pressure in the brain and heart. Check in with your hypertensive students to ensure they have their doctor's release to practice yoga and to verify that their high blood pressure scenario is being monitored and treated via medication. If they are medicated and have a doctor's clearance, help them perform plow pose, or halasana (either the formal version or a supported variant) for several minutes prior to sarvangasana. This will calm and soothe the heart, brain and blood pressure prior to entering shoulderstand. Halasana gives their vascular system an opportunity to slowly adjust to the inversion without supplying as much of the blood of the legs and lower torso to the heart.

Migraines

Most students who're experiencing a migraine or other vascular based headaches will opt to pass on attending class. However, you will come across some students who insist on attending and doing everything to its maximum. Ask your students to refrain from practicing sarvangasana during a migraine or a pre-migrainous aura. The increased blood flow to the cranium could exacerbate the issue. Practice of shoulderstand in between migraine presentations is recommended to help adjust the glandular, vascular and neural components contributing to and affected by migraines.

Menstruation

Do not practice shoulderstand during menstruation. We want the blood to move out of the uterus, away from the cervix. Sarvangasana will do the opposite. Do not put yourself or your students at risk of endometriosis. Pass on shoulderstand until after menstruation concludes. Some practitioners will begin sarvangasana again if their flow is brown near the end of menstruation, but I recommend waiting until shedding has concluded. It might be more advantageous to be working in harmony with nature than in harmony with the ego's desire to perform sarvangasana.

Cervical herniation history

Be extremely cautious helping students with cervican herniation histories practice sarvangasana. Ensure they have a doctor's clearance to practice weight bearing upon their shoulders while the neck is in flexion.

Some students with this history can practice shoulderstand in a healthy way, when combined with appropriate preparation and counterposing, that affords them the benefits of sarvangasana without increased risk of neck injury.

If they're cleared for shouldertand practice, begin with the variation that has them sitting on a chair and dropping their shoulders back onto a supported bolster. This variation puts most of the pelvis and leg weight into the chair instead of their shoulders. Adjust the bolster height so that there is cervical extension (backbend) instead of cervical flexion (forward bend). If they can practice this variation for 6 months without incident, then there might be the possibility of progressing towards a variation that more closely resembles the full pose.

The goal is not to get them in shoulderstand. The goal is to help them receive the benefits of shoulderstand in a way that honors their connective tissue history and needs. Err on the side of caution and let time and experience and their medical specialist's guidance lead the way.

Lumbar herniation history

Although the lumbo-sacral area is relatively neutral in the formal version of shoulderstand, and slightly flexed while the student is progressing towards full shoulderstand, the process of entering the pose brings the lumbar spine into deep flexion combined with knee flexion. This presents a significant risk for students with a lumbar disc herniation history.

As with the cervical herniation history, ask the student to obtain clearance from their medical team. If they have clearance, then begin with the chair seat version of shoulderstand, which ensures lumbar extension while in the pose. If 6 months of regular practice with the chair version goes splendidly, then consider progressing to another alternative with slightly more challenge.

Glaucoma

Shoulderstand can increase eye pressure. Do not bring your glaucoma affected students into shoulderstand. Ask them to seek counsel from their eye specialist regarding inversions.

Flexibility and Functional Movements

To perform sarvangasana, we call upon flexibility in certain areas to enable us to take the shape of the pose. Functional movements refer to the directional reaches we can make through the muscles, bones and fascias to coordinate support for shoulderstand.

Chest and pectoral muscles

If the chest and pectoral muscles are tight and shortened, they will prevent the external rotation required of the shoulder joint when in shoulderstand. If the shoulders are prevented from robust external rotation, then chest collapses in shouldertand, thwarting the progress towards a vertical torso and complicating neck bodymechanics. Pectoral length also allows the upper arm to move into extension, going behind the plane of the ribcage, while in sarvangasana. This allows the torso to continue progressing towards vertical and reduces the amount of propping necessary under the elbows. A simple pectoral stretch at the wall is a nice way to begin opening this space.



Latissimus dorsi

If the lats are restricted, they will also prevent external rotation at the shoulder joint. Elongating the lats can help to mobilize the scapulae as well. An ardha uttanasana at the wall will help to elongate the lats.

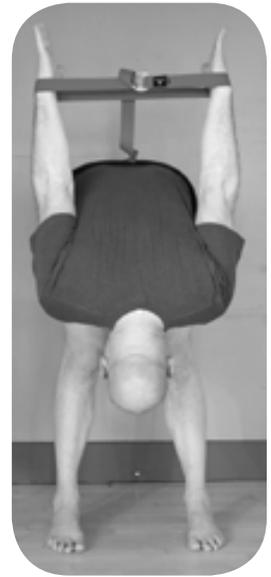


Scapular functional movement

In shoulderstand, we want the shoulderblades to move laterally, away from the spine, out toward the side body. At the same time, they should be moving away from the head, towards the waist. Placing a strap around the wrists while in uttanasana gives us an opportunity to practice this scapular functional movement dynamic.



scrunched



broadened

Posterior body opening

Entering and growing in shoulderstand requires an elongation of the back body's fascia. We will need length in the upper back, lower back and the back of the legs in order to provide a space into which we can move away from the blankets towards the heavens. Parsvottanasana with the arms behind the back gives us the chance to develop these three openings while simultaneously preparing the shoulders for the pose.



Upper abdominal strength

To enter into sarvangasana, we will call upon our upper abdomen to help lift the weight of the pelvis and legs towards the chest and then to stabilize ourselves while the legs rise towards the heavens. There are a couple of basic abdominal activities that can build this strength and functional movement.



Canoe pose asks students to bring the straightened legs off the floor, place the hands as if for headstand, and then use the upper abs to raise the upper back, until the lower tips of the shoulderblades lift slightly from the floor.



Another upper abdominal strengthener asks the student to support the pelvis with a bolster, stabilize the upperbody by pressing the elbows down into the floor, bring the knees towards the chest, and then employ the upper abs to begin reducing the weight of the pelvis on the bolster.



Chest opening with cervico-thoracic flexion

Shoulderstand's many benefits become amplified by the ability to open the chest during cervical flexion. A supported setubandha, or bridge pose, helps develop this shape in the body. The more formal version of setubandha gives us a chance to practice the functional dynamics of the arms and scapula as well.

