Your complete guide to chair yoga

Benefits, 7 best exercises + a 3-minute relaxation practice

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While chair **yoga** is popular with seniors (4.4k Google 'chair yoga for seniors' every month), it's an effective way to stay active, whether you're recovering from **injury** and working your way back up to standing exercises, you're struggling with **mobility**, or if you want a way to **relax** with limited effort. **Studies** show it's good for improving balance and mobility, plus **boosting overall wellbeing** and **cognitive function**, and **increasing muscle mass**.

WH consulted Liz Oppedijk, a chair yoga teacher trainer at **Accessible Chair Yoga CIC** for a comprehensive and full guide to chair yoga, from the best chair yoga exercises, including a practice from **Lakshmi Voelker**, the creator of chair yoga, to chair yoga for seniors and the practice's myriad benefits.

Meet the expert: Liz Oppedijk is a yoga therapist, chair yoga teacher trainer at **Accessible Chair Yoga CIC**, yoga researcher, and co-author of ***Get Fit Where You Sit: A Guide to the Lakshmi Voelker Chair Yoga Method*** (Shambhala Publications, £16)

What is chair yoga?

Chair yoga is a form of yoga performed while seated on a chair or using a chair for support. It offers an accessible way to practise yoga, modifying traditional poses for people who might find them challenging.

8 benefits of chair yoga

Oppedijk notes that chair yoga provides all the qualities and benefits of traditional mat yoga, including conscious breathing, purposeful movement, and mindful **meditation**. In addition, here are some specific benefits:

1.It improves physical health

Like yoga, chair yoga can help improve or maintain flexibility, coordination, balance, strength, stamina, and overall fitness, advises Oppedijk. A **study** showed that the odds of having normal blood pressure were 85% higher when practising yoga than when not, and that the odds increased with age.

2. It's injury- and limited-mobility-friendly

Chair yoga is suitable for individuals with limited physical mobility, such as older adults, those who cannot stand or move easily between standing and seated positions, and those rehabilitating from illness or **injury**, says Oppedijk. One **study** found that those who practised yoga were 18.4% less likely to have an injury-related medical encounter compared to when they were training as normal, while another **study** showed that yoga reduced the risk of injury in football players.

The exercise may increase mobility, too. **Research** revealed that practising yoga resulted in small improvements in balance and medium improvements in mobility in people aged 60 and over, while another **study** showed that 60 minutes of Kripalu yoga (a practice that emphasises harmony, self-awareness and **compassion**) improved posture, mobility and walking speed in 13 adults in their 60s and 70s.

3. It's accessible and adaptable

Chair yoga is accessible and inclusive for everyone, regardless of age or fitness level, including those chronic health conditions, reassures Oppedijk. Every pose can be adjusted to suit the practitioner’s level.

Any style of yoga can be practised on the chair, from gentle restorative yoga to more athletic forms. Many people practise chair yoga in a gentle, low-impact way, although there are also more vigorous chair yoga practices that can make you sweat!

Research supports this, with one **study** discussing the feasibility and safety of adaptive yoga for older adults with a range of comorbidities (medical conditions that occur alongside a primary diagnosis, like **high blood pressure** in addition to heart disease), improving physical function and social wellbeing.

4. It's convenient

As 'all you need is a chair', this style of exercise provides 'a convenient way to practise yoga for anyone while they work, study, or travel, such as office workers and students', observes Oppedijk. A **study** found that remotely supervised online chair yoga programme was suitable for adults with dementia.

5. It improves mental and emotional health

Chair yoga can help 'lower stress levels, improve mood, and enhance concentration and focus', says Oppedijk. The psychological benefits of yoga have often been highlighted, with one **study** confirming that yoga has been shown to 'reduce **stress**, **anxiety**, depression, and chronic pain; improve **sleep** patterns; and enhance overall well-being and quality of life'. Another **study** found that Isha yoga - which, according to the **Isha Foundation**, 'distills powerful, ancient yogic methods for a modern person, creating peak physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing' - lowered levels of stress and mental distress and increased feelings of wellbeing more than not practising yoga.

6. It can bring about social connection

Chair yoga encourages social interaction when practised in a group, creating a sense of community and reducing feelings of loneliness, suggest Oppedijk. Confirming this, one **study** showed that, among 473 participants, feelings of social connection improved significantly and stress levels were lowered after regularly practising Sudarshan Kriya yoga, a breathing technique that involves breathing in slow, medium, and fast cycles. Chair yoga can also be a great activity to do together with elderly parents and relatives, says Oppedijk.

7. It improves functional fitness

A **study** published in *Healthcare* found that **functional fitness** and daily life activities improved for older adults with knee osteoarthritis after 12 weeks of chair yoga, while another **study** showed that yoga provided some relief for chronic **lower-back** pain.

8. It can improve cognitive function

Yoga can improve mental function, with **research** published in the *Journal of Applied Gerontology* showing improved mood and reduced anxiety and depression in older adults with and without dementia after two months of chair yoga practised twice a week.

A 2015 **study** also showed that grey matter (associated with greater thinking skills and memory) was preserved in yoga practitioners, regardless of age, whereas this brain tissue normally declines as you get older.

Is chair yoga good for weight loss?

Chair yoga can contribute to **weight loss** by increasing physical activity, strengthening **muscles**, reducing stress, and encouraging the practice of mindful awareness, including of habits such as **nutrition choices**, says Oppedijk.

Yoga in general has been shown to be beneficial for weight loss, with one **study** finding that a 12-week yoga intervention on women with abdominal obesity 'reduced participants' waist circumference, waist-hip ratio, body weight, BMI, and percentage of body fat and increased the percentage of **muscle** mass'. Another **study** showed much the same, with BMI and body fat mass decreasing, and muscle mass increasing, at weeks 8 and 12 after practising yoga.

Oppedijk advises practising regularly (3-5 times each week) and as part of a weight-loss plan that includes a balanced diet and **cardiovascular** exercise (such as **walking**, **cycling**, or **swimming**).

Remember that weight loss depends on many factors, including but not limited to: age, height, genetics, gender, lifestyle and if you are taking any medication. If you are considering starting a weight-loss programme, consult your doctor first.

Does chair yoga really work?

There is substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness and health benefits of yoga, which applies to chair yoga in many instances, notes Oppedijk. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) provides a **summary** of scientific research on the health benefits, such as increased general wellbeing and reduced stress, and less inattention and hyperactivity in children. See above for a full list of 8 benefits of chair yoga.

7 chair yoga exercises

Here are seven chair yoga exercises, which can be practised by anyone, either gently or more dynamically. The key is to modify the movements according to each person's levels of flexibility (i.e. range of movement) and energy on the day of practice.

Anyone can modify chair yoga poses by following the Lakshmi Voelker Method, a practice from **Lakshmi Voelker**, the creator of chair yoga, which she started in 1982.

Safety considerations: Safety is essential. Readers should consult a healthcare professional before beginning to practise chair yoga or any exercise programme.

How to start and end your chair yoga practice

A) Begin each session by coming into Sitting Mountain pose (see below) and taking three or more long, slow breaths. Gaze forward or down, or close your eyes to settle your body and mind.

B) Once you have completed all the movements you wish to practise, comeback into Sitting Mountain for a few long, slow breaths.

If you wish, end with the Three-Minute Chair Yoga for Relaxation practice (see below) or another relaxation or meditation of your choice.

1. Sitting Mountain Pose

A) Slide forward about halfway on the chair seat. Bring your legs and feet parallel to each other, with your body in right angles and your feet hip-distance apart.

B) Sit up tall and bring your chin parallel to the ground, lengthening your torso and back and lifting the crown of your head toward the ceiling. Place your hands on your thighs, palms facing up or down.

C) Press your feet down onto the ground to actively engage your leg muscles while relaxing your shoulders back and down. Gaze forward or down, or close your eyes. **Hold for 3 or more slow breaths.**

Modification: If you need to adapt the chair to your height, use a block or book under your feet or place a blanket or cushion on the chair seat.

2. Crescent Moon Pose

Benefits: Stretches the psoas (a muscle on either side of your spine, connecting your spine to your pelvis) and other deep muscles in the side body that support the spine.

A) Start in Sitting Mountain Pose. Interlace your fingers together in front of your chest and release the index fingers upward.

B) Raise your arms up as high as you wish – anywhere between your chest and lengthening your arms next to your ears.

C) While pressing your feet down to engage your leg muscles, sit up tall. Then lean the torso and arms to the right side. Gaze forward or over your right shoulder.

D) Return to Sitting Mountain and repeat on the other side. **Hold for up to three slow breaths on each side.**

Modification: To develop balance further, lift the heel and come up on the toes opposite the tilt.

3. Lunge Pose

Benefits: Stretches the quadriceps in the thighs and the psoas to relieve stiff and tight muscles.

A) Turn to the right side of the chair and move into Sitting Mountain Pose. Holding the chair seat with both hands, come up onto the ball of your left foot and slide the foot back, letting your knee drop down. You can use a block for support if you wish.

B) Stretch one or both arms forward or up, palms facing each other. Press your feet down to engage your leg muscles.

C) Hinge forward from your hips, gazing straight ahead or up. Return to Sitting Mountain and repeat on the other side. **Hold for up to three slow breaths on each side.**

Modification: Place a block under the bent right leg to maintain or further the stretch in your quads and psoas.

4. Twist Pose

Benefits: Supports good digestion and flexibility in the back and spine.

A) Start in Sitting Mountain Pose. Place your right hand on your right thigh and your left hand in front of it. Press down onto your feet and sit up tall, then turn your head and torso slightly to the right.

B) For a deeper twist, hold the chair seat with the right hand and place the left hand on the outside of the right thigh. Sit up tall, then turn further to the right.

C) Return to Sitting Mountain and repeat on the other side. **Hold for up to three slow breaths on each side.**

Modification: Turn the head in the opposite direction to the torso to release the spine further.

5. Victory Pose

Benefits: Increases flexibility in and strengthens the upper back and mid back to counter forward rounding of the spine.

A) Start in Sitting Mountain Pose. Keep your legs parallel or open them wider into a V- or L- shape. Bring your fingertips to your ears, interlace your fingers behind your head, or raise your arms into an L-shape at shoulder height with palms facing forward, fingertips stretching wide.

B) Lean back from the mid or upper back, keeping your neck in line with the rest of your spine. Gaze forward or slightly up. **Hold for one slow breath, then return to sit up tall and repeat two or three times.** Return to Sitting Mountain.

▶▶ **Modification:** Put a ball or orange in the hollow of your neck to avoid dropping your head back too far.

6. Dancer Pose

Benefits: Elongates the spine and stretches the full body from toes to fingertips.

A) Start in Sitting Mountain Pose. Come onto the ball of your right foot. Leave it here or bring it back towards or under the chair. Hold the side of the chair seat with your right hand.

B) Allow your left arm to extend outward or upward, keeping your right hand on the chair seat. Press onto your feet and start to hinge forward from your hips. Gaze forward or up.

C) Return to Sitting Mountain and repeat on the other side. **Hold for up to three slow breaths on each side.**

▶▶ **Modification:** For a fuller stretch, reach your right hand backward to hold the side of the chair back as your body moves forward.

7. Squat Pose

Benefits: Strengthens the **core** and **quadricep** muscles in the thighs to help maintain the ability to bend up and down through the **legs**.

A) Start in Sitting Mountain pose. Keep your legs parallel or open them wider into a V or L shape. Bring your palms together in front of your chest.

B) Keep your back lengthened and hinge forward from your hips slightly, or hinge further to bring your elbows on top of or between your knees. Press onto your feet and into your palms to engage leg and arm muscles. Gaze forward or down. **Hold for up to three slow breaths.** Return to Sitting Mountain.

▶▶ **Modification:** Keep your head above your heart if you feel dizzy or faint or have blood pressure issues.

▶▶ Readers can learn more either by reading my book, ***Get Fit Where You Sit: A Guide to the Lakshmi Voelker Chair Yoga Method*** (Shambhala Publications, £16), or by finding a teacher trained in this method (or another method that highlights safe adaptations).

Chair yoga for seniors

The above seven exercises can be performed by anyone, including seniors. Similarly, the three-minute chair yoga for relaxation below can also be used by practitioners of all ages.

Three-minute chair yoga for relaxation

A) Come into Sitting Mountain on your chair, focusing on the cues that bring you into postural alignment. Silently or aloud set an intention, such as 'Time for a pause to reset.'

B) Place (or imagine) one hand on your chest and one on your belly and take three slow breaths, noticing your breath flowing in and out of the body and the movement of your body as it breathes.

C) From Sitting Mountain, warm up any stiff joints—your choice. Get your ankles moving by coming up onto the ball of one foot and circling your ankle a few times. Or lift your foot off the ground to rotate it. Repeat on the other side.

D) Now rotate your shoulders and wrists. Loosen your knees by sliding each leg forward and back, one at a time, or by lifting your thigh (using your hands underneath to assist if you'd like) and swinging your leg forward and back.

E) Turn your head from side to side to release your neck, then tilt one ear down to your shoulder and back up again, and then do the same on the other side.

F) Now, sit all the way back on your chair while keeping the spine lengthened. With your eyes closed or with a soft downward gaze, breathe slowly and deeply into the abdomen for a few breaths, visualising an image that is calming and relaxing, or repeating an affirmation to your-self, either silently or aloud, such as 'I am resting. I am releasing. I am relaxing.'

G) Slowly return to Sitting Mountain, then resume whatever you were doing, with gratitude for this brief gift of space.

*- From **Get Fit Where You Sit: A Guide to the Lakshmi Voelker Method** by Lakshmi Voelker and Liz Oppedijk, p. 185.*

Can I get a chair yoga plan for free?

Yes, you can! Oppedijk recommends **MoreYoga Wellness TV**, which offers 30 days' free access to four chair yoga sessions on these topics: balance, Sun Salutations, Moon Salutations, and mindfulness.

How many days a week should I do chair yoga?

The frequency of chair yoga practice depends on each person's goals, fitness level, and schedule, notes Oppedijk. Beginners can start with 1-2 days per week.

As the movements become more familiar and a routine develops, she recommend increasing practice to 3-5 days per week for optimal results. A daily practice – even a short session, like the 3-minute Chair Yoga for Relaxation – can be enormously beneficial.

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Kate puts together fitness content that covers functional and strength training, cardio, workout challenges, interviews and news. She's often doing gym laundry or listening to music.