



## A perfect twist to health

**Long hours of sitting can leave you with a stiff and sore back. Here's how to maintain spinal flexibility, which is essential for good health**

BY TARA GOSWAMI

There are innumerable benefits to be had from a good twist to the spine, which suffers from the long hours we spend sitting. Twisting stretches release the muscles of the lower back and maintain spinal flexibility, which is critical for good health. The half-spinal twist or Ardha Matsyendrasana is one such asana, especially since lower back pain and a stiff back affect just about everybody.

This pose is named after the mythological sage Matsyendra, who is said to have been one of the first teachers of yoga. Here's how the story goes: One day Parvati approaches the Hindu god Shiva, troubled about the plight of the earth after the onset of Kalyug. She asks Shiva to provide a remedy, or "a way out". Shiva sits down in a lonely spot by a river with Parvati and unfolds the mysteries of yoga to her. But while he does so, Parvati falls asleep. There is no one else around but a fish in the river who patiently listens to every word of Shiva's. When Shiva realizes the fish has learnt everything, he sprinkles some water on it. The fish gains divine form and becomes Matsyendra, or the Lord of Fish, and proceeds to spread yogic knowledge.

If you've ever seen a fish twisting and turning in water, you will know why this lovely little fable captures the essence of yoga.

### The half-spinal twist

To get into the Ardha Matsyendrasana pose, start by sitting in Vajrasana (kneel on the ground so that the toes of both feet touch each other; sit on your heels, knees together, and spine straight in line with the neck).

Now drop your hips to your right, bend your left knee, bringing it up close to your chest, and pulling your left foot close to your right thigh. Beginners may keep the right leg stretched straight in front of them. Make sure you are sitting on both your sitting bones, which will be the foundation of the pose. Stretch your left arm and then place it behind you on the left side. Stretch your right arm in front of you and keeping that stretch either hug your knee close to your chest, or if you are a more advanced yoga practitioner, take your right arm around your left knee and hold on to your left ankle.

As you inhale, lengthen your spine. As you exhale, twist from your waist to look behind your left shoulder.

With every inhalation, work on the length of the spine, and with every exhalation work, gently towards moving into a deeper twist. Make sure your spine is as straight as possible and there is no weight on your left hand. The spiralling motion, caused by the twist, should be felt equally on both sides of the spine, starting from its base and moving up its entire length. Both shoulders should be in line with each other.

Hold this pose for as long as you are comfortable. Beginners should aim for 30 seconds, and more advanced practitioners for around a minute.

Now repeat on the other side. Most of you will find twisting one side easier than the other side. If that is the case, try and

spend more time on the side that you're able to twist less.

Keeping the eyes closed helps us to move deep within ourselves to a place of quiet calm. After you perform the pose on both sides, rest in Shavasana (the corpse pose) for 5-10 minutes. Just lie on your back as relaxed as you can, legs slightly apart, arms on the sides with palms up, and breathe gently. Consciously let your mind focus on various parts of the body, gradually letting it relax on the ground as you move into a state of deep relaxation.

### The benefits of the pose

The half-spinal twist keeps the spine supple. Every vertebra is rotated in both directions and the spine is invigorated. The ligaments attached to the spine receive a rich supply of blood because of the movement. The lateral stretch helps relieve lumbago and rheumatism.

Rheumatic pains are caused by the drying up of the synovial fluid, which is like a lubricant for the joints. Through this pose, the synovial fluid increases and activates the joints, aiding them to move smoothly.

By massaging the abdominal and pelvic organs, this asana aids digestion, increases metabolism, and helps the liver and spleen function more efficiently. This in turn helps to eliminate toxins from the body. You can get relief from constipation and dyspepsia. The shoulders are also stretched in this pose, and become more open. The nerves are calmed.

Always make sure to perform asanas on an empty stomach, allowing 3-4 hours to lapse after your last meal.

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**For beginners:** Keep one leg straight on the ground for an easier stretch.