

The Low Down

Learn to hover with grace in this character-building pose.

FOR THE FIRST COUPLE of years of my yoga life, Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) was the *bête noire* of my practice. As a flexible person with loose shoulders, I thought the pose was designed for another species—one that had a strength that was completely alien to me. Over time, though, Chaturanga has become a great friend and teacher, helping me to develop the strength and stability that once seemed elusive and imprint actions and principles that serve throughout my practice. The pose is challenging for many students, but its payoffs are great: It strengthens the arms and legs, tones the abdominals, builds healthy shoulders, and prepares students for arm balances, inversions, and backbends. And it's character building.

Chaturanga presents different challenges for different bodies. It can initially be harder for women than for men. Men generally have stronger pectoral muscles than women and can use their power to muscle through Chaturanga. The key to making the pose doable for *any* body is to learn proper alignment. Correct alignment builds strength for those who struggle in that department and teaches the sturdier student, who often relies on brute force, to refine the pose in ways that prevent damaging the shoulders. Learn to set yourself up accurately, and you'll see



DON'T Dip shoulders lower than elbows.



DO Keep shoulders elbow height.

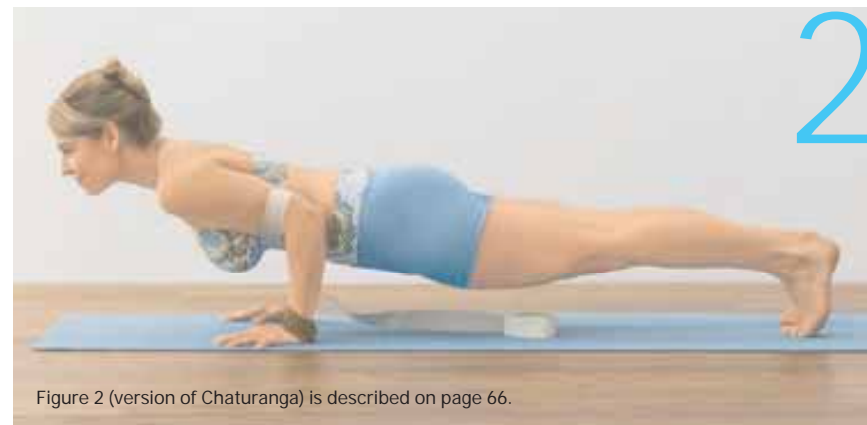


Figure 2 (version of Chaturanga) is described on page 66.

Maintaining this alignment in the shoulders and chest while bearing weight is as challenging as it is crucial. But there are a few ways to make a well-aligned Chaturanga more accessible. First, practice the pose with your knees down on the floor and closely monitor your elbow alignment. Next, notice how deep you go as you lower yourself toward the floor and catch yourself before you go too far. Finally, share the effort of the pose between the upper and the lower body so that the legs can play an active role.

USE YOUR TRICEPS

Try a variation that takes some of the difficulty out of the pose so that you can focus on the details that will protect your shoulders as you develop strength.

Begin in Plank Pose. See that your hands are directly underneath your shoulders, your feet hip-distance apart, and your heels stacked over your toes. Pull the navel in to engage your core. Extend your sternum forward as you press your heels back, so that you feel your body getting long and strong. Draw the front of your thighs toward the ceiling—but don't allow the tailbone to follow, or you'll wind up with your butt stuck up high in the air. Instead, release your tailbone toward your heels and notice how that makes you more compact at your center.

Keeping your gaze on the floor, look slightly forward so that the crown of your head is a continuation of the line of your spine. From Plank, drop your knees to the floor but maintain the lifted, engaged feeling in your lower belly—almost as though it were a tray carrying your lower back (*see figure 1*). Keep your toes tucked under so you can retain a sense of your heels pressing back. From here, reestablish your alignment: Inhale, drawing the heads of the shoulders up away from the floor and reemphasizing the lift in your belly as you direct the tip of your tailbone down. As you exhale, bend your elbows, keeping them drawn in against your sides, and slowly lower yourself toward

that Chaturanga isn't just about upper-body strength—that's a misperception. To practice with integrity and ease, you'll need to distribute the work throughout the entire body by rallying the power of your abdomen, spine, legs, and heels.

NOT A PUSH-UP

The tendency with Chaturanga is to practice it like a push-up, letting the elbows flare out and burdening the upper body. This creates misalignments in the shoulders, placing these delicate joints at risk. To understand how this happens, hold your arms out in front of you at shoulder height with your hands shoulder-distance apart, as if you were in Plank Pose. Then bend your elbows, allowing them to stick out. Observe the effect that this has on your shoulders; the heads of your upper arms fall forward and your breastbone (sternum) sinks. Now do it again, but this time hug your elbows in at your sides. Notice the position of your upper body: The head of the upper arm is in line with (not in front of) the side of your body, and the sternum remains buoyant.

Pose Benefits

- Strengthens arm, shoulder, and leg muscles
- Develops core stability
- Prepares body for inversions and arm balances

Contraindications

- Wrist or shoulder injury
- Pregnancy (though there is some debate about this)

the floor. Keep your body as straight as a plank of wood, neither letting your center sag nor sticking your butt up in the air. Notice the distinction between this modification and the Knees-Chest-Chin variation taught in many classes. Knees-Chest-Chin has many fine qualities but is not an ideal model for imprinting the alignment of Chaturanga. Make sure that as you lower yourself toward the floor, the heads of your upper arms remain at the same height as your elbows (rather than dropping toward the floor as they do in Knees-Chest-Chin).

If you are correctly aligned, your belly will reach the floor before your chest does. Keep your elbows by your sides, pull up through your core, and press back up to all fours. You'll feel your triceps working. If you don't, you have probably allowed your elbows to splay out, with your shoulders bearing the burden of the work.

CATCH YOURSELF

The next modification teaches two features of a healthy Chaturanga: catching yourself at elbow height and activating your legs. With a strap, make a loop that's as wide as your hips. (When you hold the loop flat across your abdomen at hipbone level, it should go from one side of your hips to the other.) Place it around your arms just above the elbows and come into Plank. As you inhale, reach your sternum and heels in opposite directions to get long, then lift the tops of your thighs and direct the tailbone toward your heels. Feel how the previous two actions prevent you from collapsing at your center and activate your core. As you exhale, energize your legs, keep the shoulders lifted and the chest extended forward, and bend your elbows until the strap catches you (see figure 2). Your shoulders should be at the same height as your elbows, so that each arm creates a 90-degree angle.

When you lower yourself beneath elbow height, it is very hard to maintain correct alignment in the shoulders, and they can become compromised. With the strap to support you, stay in the pose and reactivate the legs so they are lively participants. Heels back and heart forward will galvanize the quadriceps; thighs up

staff of life

Practicing Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) plays a vital role in doing the Sun Salutations that are central to Ashtanga and vinyasa flow yoga. The pose strengthens and tones the entire body, helps teach important alignment, and prepares you for a multitude of positions, including the following:

ARM BALANCES The upper-body and lower-belly strength that you develop by practicing Chaturanga, combined with the confidence it instills, translates beautifully into the kind of power and core consciousness you need for arm balances such as Bakasana (Crane Pose, often called Crow Pose), Galavasana (Flying Pigeon Pose), and Vasisthasana (Side Plank Pose).

INVERSIONS Chaturanga creates a stability in the shoulders, a sense of compactness at the center, and an alertness in the legs. These are crucial to doing safe inversions. When practiced with attention to alignment, Chaturanga becomes the ideal training for poses like Sirsasana (Headstand), Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance), and Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand).

BACKBENDS The legs feature prominently in a healthy Chaturanga and in healthy backbends (in which the curve of the spine is evenly distributed). Learning to use the legs effectively in Chaturanga imprints this awareness, so that the legs can play an active role in poses such as Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), and Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose, often called Wheel Pose).

and tailbone down will engage the belly, giving the pose vitality at its center. To deepen the difficulty and reinforce correct actions, use your core and legs to press back up to Plank.

SHARE THE WORK

Ready to try the full pose? Come to Plank. Ideally, your body in Chaturanga will look just like your body in Plank, except with bent elbows. Emphasize these qualities, lifting and firming the entire body. Look slightly forward so that your head is not drooping (which tends to drag the shoulders down as you move into Chaturanga). As you exhale, keep your elbows drawn in and your shoulder heads lifted. Slowly lower down. Create 90-degree angles with your arms, with your upper arms parallel to the floor and forearms perpendicular. Your goal is to stay straight and strong; keep pressing your heels back and reaching your heart forward so that your body remains taut.

Avoid common Chaturanga pitfalls: One tendency is to either sink at the center of the torso (creating a backbend),

another is to leave the butt up in the air as the shoulders dip toward the floor (creating a pike). The more you can activate the front of your body so that it supports the back of your body, the more success you will have at avoiding these polarities. Engage the belly and quadriceps by lifting the tops of the thighs to the ceiling and drawing your tailbone toward your heels. Another pitfall is to put so much energy into reaching the chest forward that you forget to press the heels back. When this happens, you come too far forward onto your toes and lose the strength of the legs, forcing the shoulders to work overtime. If the shoulders carry the pose, they often collapse, sacrificing alignment and creating vulnerability. To prevent this, stack your heels over your toes in Plank, and keep pressing them back even as you enthusiastically extend your sternum forward and move into Chaturanga. When your legs come to the party, your shoulders will thank you. ■

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