



## reshape your chair-bound body

BY SANDRA SUMMERFIELD KOZAK

My grandfather, a logger, worked every day from before dawn until dark. My grandmother finished her equally long workday by making six pies (from scratch, of course) in an iron stove that she continually stoked and refilled with the wood my grandfather chopped. Both of their bodies were constantly in motion except when they ate, read the evening paper, or slept. They worked hard but they were healthy, in large part because they used their bodies the way they were meant to be used. The human body was made to move, yet today many of us lead sedentary lives.

We spend most of our waking hours sitting, and that isn't healthy. It limits circulation, for example, creates muscular imbalances, and puts strain on the back. (You may feel like you're resting when you're sitting, but your back is actually bearing more weight than it does when you are walking or lying down.) And when we are under stress as we sit—fighting our way through rush-hour traffic, cramming for an exam, or trying to meet a deadline at work—we are unconsciously tensing our muscles, further limiting circulation and exacerbating muscular imbalance. Sitting here at my computer typing out this article, I realize again that by spending so much time sitting, we are creating chair-bound bodies. Our posture and the way we move is determined by the strengths and weaknesses in various muscle groups. Each joint has opposing sets of muscles that control its movement. The extensor muscles straighten the joint, the flexors bend it, and the rotators twist and turn the bones. When our muscles are in proper balance we feel good, have full use of our joints, and enjoy good posture and good health. But if we sit for extended periods our musculature begins conforming to the shape of the chair. For example, prolonged sitting causes the knee flexors (back leg muscles)

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to tighten more than their opposing knee extensors (front leg muscles). With shorter flexor muscles, the joint cannot open fully and the extensors can never fully contract. The result? Our use of the knee joint becomes limited. In addition, prolonged sitting leads to weak abdominals and abductors, shortened quadriceps, tighter hamstrings, and shortened calf muscles. And after years of

prolonged sitting—in classrooms, at work, at home in the evening—these limitations and the imbalances between flexors, rotators, and extensors begin to feel normal. When our bodies become chair-bound we are likely to carry these imbalances into all the other areas of our lives without knowing that we have become restricted by the shape of our muscles and the fascia that encases them.

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Every muscle is encased in a sheath or thin covering (fascia) that conforms to the shapes used by the muscle as it contracts and stretches.

The fascia is elastic and flexible to a certain point, but it also provides some stability by pulling back when we pass beyond our normal range of movement. With chair-bound bodies the fascia tends to recreate a modified version of the sitting position even when we are relaxing after work. So when we arrive home at the end of a long day and fall into our easy chair, we may find that our body unconsciously relaxes into a position that conforms to our habitually rounded shoulders, shortened leg muscles, and compressed lower spine.

And there is more. When we hold the muscles of the shoulders, neck, and head in one position (or a limited range of positions) for prolonged periods, they tighten; this can trigger a tension headache. Hunching over a monitor or rounding our shoulders while we make our way through a mound of paperwork shortens the diaphragm, which in turn reduces our breathing capacity, triggering low-level anxiety. Prolonged sitting stretches the pelvic floor, allowing gravity to pull the abdominal organs downward, which can cause constipation. And finally, sitting for hours on end reduces the bloodflow throughout the body. Over the years, sluggish bloodflow causes the spinal discs to compress, leading first to discomfort

and then to degeneration in the spine. All this simply because we spend too much time anchored to chairs!

Even if you can't avoid sitting for prolonged periods—and many of us can't—you can keep your body flexible and strong while you do it. One of the simplest solutions is to incorporate the easy rebalancing practice that follows into your work routine. This series of movements and modified postures is designed to be done in the clothes you wear to the office. It will reshape your body, promote circulation, and release muscular tension so you feel refreshed and more even-keeled (as my grandmother would put it). If you do this seven-minute routine (or even parts of it) four times during working hours (at 10 a.m., noon, 2, and 4 p.m., for example), you will loosen your tight places, tighten your loose places, and counteract the tendency to settle into a chair-bound body.

To understand whether your body needs to be reshaped and, if so, exactly what needs to be done, you need to become aware of your normal sitting posture. Begin by sitting in your chair; feel your lower back. Do you sit with an arched lumbar spine, or is it rounded? Observe your shoulders. Are they held back, or rounded forward? Is your head forward and your neck straight, or do you have a natural curve in your neck when you sit? The muscles in the legs need to be stretched and strengthened, although you may not be able to feel the imbalance. After you have assessed your sitting position and have run through this practice several times, you will be able to select the positions that bring the most relief and balance to your body by practicing them daily.

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## Rebalancing Practice

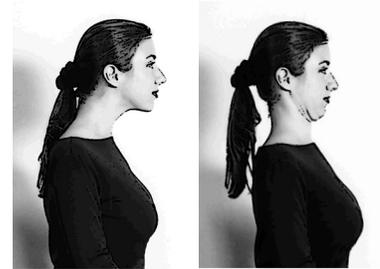
**1. side neck stretch.** This easy neck stretch relieves the tension that builds up from holding the head still or in limited positions for long periods of time.

Drop your right ear toward your right shoulder. Lower your left shoulder to increase the stretch. Hold for 30–60 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



**2. chin extensions.** To release a tight jaw and relax the stiff neck that often accompanies prolonged desk work, try this.

Sit up straight and move your chin and jaw as far forward (not up) as you can. Then pull your chin back as far as possible, lengthening the back of your neck. Repeat 5–10 times. Then pause and notice the effect.



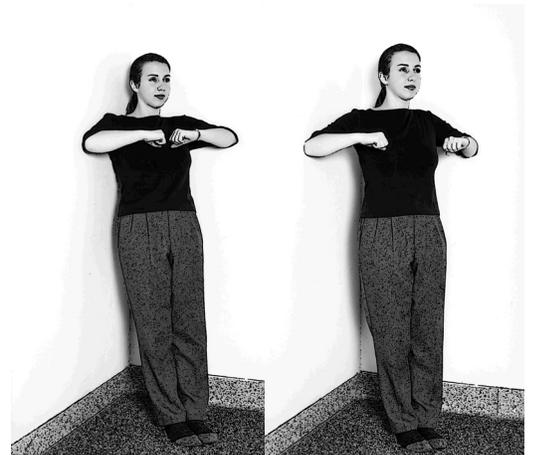
**3. modified cat stretch.** Cat stretching lengthens and strengthens the spinal muscles and produces nourishing bloodflow to the spinal discs.

Stand up and place your hands on the seat of a stable chair about shoulder-width apart. Step back until your back is flat and your legs are straight under your hips. As you exhale round your spine, raising your mid-back toward the ceiling. As you inhale bring your tailbone up and your shoulders back (opening your chest) as you move your spine down toward the floor. Repeat 5–10 times to begin.



**4. corner push-ups.** This posterior push-up will strengthen the upper back muscles—the rhomboids and trapezius, in particular—and counteract the hunched-over shoulders that are so common in bodies that are becoming chair-bound.

Stand with your back to a corner (sometimes a corner can be hard to find, but there's one somewhere, maybe in the restroom). Bend your elbows and place your upper arms at shoulder height on the two walls. Keeping your body straight, step forward until your heels are 12–18 inches from the wall. Still keeping your body straight, exhale while pushing away from the wall with your arms and elbows. Inhale and release. Repeat 5–10 times. When finished, release your shoulders by doing 10–15 shoulder rolls. Pause for a moment and notice the feeling of relaxation in your shoulders and upper back.





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**5. wall push-ups.** This easy push-up strengthens the muscles that keep the chest open and relieves wrist, hand, and arm fatigue.

Stand 2–4 feet in front of a wall, facing it. Place your hands shoulder-distance apart on the wall with the fingertips at chest height. Keeping your body straight, slowly bend your elbows (keep them close to the body), bringing your chest toward the wall. Slowly push back, straightening your arms. Repeat 10 or more times to begin.

**6. calf stretch.** This easy stretch will lengthen the gastrocnemius muscles (knee flexors) that are shortened by prolonged sitting.

From the Wall Push-Up position, step your left foot forward to the wall. Keep your right leg straight with your right heel firmly on the floor as you bend your left knee until you feel a stretch in your right calf. To make sure you stretch the calf muscles evenly, keep your right heel directly behind the ball of the foot. Breathe evenly as you hold this stretch for 30–60 seconds.

To complete the stretch, hold this same position with your right heel firmly pressed into the floor and bend your right knee slightly until you feel the stretching sensation move down into the Achilles tendon in your right heel. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds or more. Change legs and repeat on the other side.

**7. extended leg balance (easy virabhadrasana 3).** Buttock and hamstring muscles that are inactive during sitting are strengthened by this simple balancing position.

Stand and place your hand on a wall or desk. Hold your torso straight as you lift your straight left leg behind you until you feel your buttock muscles tighten. Lift your right arm and stretch it to the ceiling and behind your head. Hold this position for 30–60 seconds. When you feel stable, raise your left arm to the ceiling and balance in this position for 30 or more seconds. Repeat on the other side.

**8. two-part desk push.** These two movements are wonderful for your posture. They strengthen all of the back muscles, relieve stiffness in the neck and shoulders, lengthen the backs of the legs, and strengthen the muscles that hold the shoulders back.

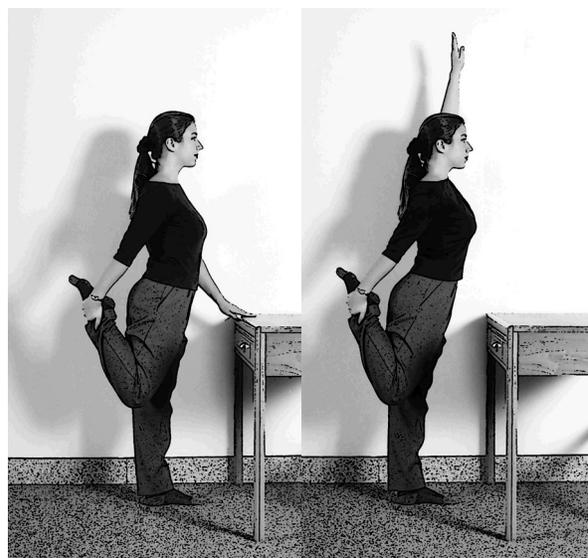
Part 1: Place your hands on the edge of a desk (or table) and step back until your feet are under your buttocks and your arms and back are in one straight line. Keep your head between your arms. Continue pushing against the desk to further lengthen your arms, shoulders, and back. Straighten your legs and tighten your quadriceps (front thighs).

Part 2: When you feel stable in this position, try lifting your hands 3 inches off the desk, one at a time (bending your knees slightly might make it easier). Be sure to maintain a straight line from your fingertips to your tailbone. After a few seconds, come up to standing by holding in your abdomen and pivoting your torso up from the hips.



**9. standing quad stretch (easy dancer pose).** Besides stretching the quadriceps, this stretch also draws the shoulders backward, opens the chest, lengthens the diaphragm, and tones the straight standing leg.

Place your left hand on the desk or wall, bend your right knee, and grasp your right ankle with your right hand. Keep your thighs close together and hold your tailbone down. If you want to increase the stretch in your right groin and thigh, pull your right ankle back behind you. When you feel stable, stretch your left hand to the ceiling and look up at your fingertips. Hold for 30–60 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



**10. chair abdominals (easy uddiyana bandha).** Abdominal muscles, weakened from extended sitting, need to be strengthened for comfortable and correct posture.

Stand about 18 inches away from your desk. Keep your arms straight as you press your hands firmly on the desk. Round your back, pushing your middle spine to the ceiling. Bring your chin to your chest and quickly exhale. Keep your lungs emptied as you pull your navel up and back to your spine. Hold this hollowed-out abdomen until you need to inhale; then relax the abdomen and then the chin before inhaling. Repeat several times to begin. Practice this only on an empty stomach.



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**11. wall hang.** This posture restores the blood to the upper body, washing away tension. It improves mental function, stretches the backs of the legs, and relaxes the neck, arms, and shoulders.

Lean against the wall with your feet 18–24 inches away from it and bend your knees slightly. Keeping your buttocks on the wall, bend at the waist and hang your upper body down toward the floor. Hold this position for a minute or more. Keep the head, upper body, and arms hanging loose as you unroll the back slowly up the wall vertebra by vertebra. Take 30–60 seconds to unroll up to standing, with your back and head resting on the wall.

### Practicing at Home

While any well-rounded asana practice will help keep your body flexible, balanced, and strong, this particular group of postures is specifically effective for counteracting chair-bound bodies. You may want to incorporate some of these poses into your regular asana routine or practice the entire group. The series takes approximately 25 minutes to complete.

### warrior 1 (virabhadrasana 1)

Warrior 1 stretches the hip flexors and groin muscles of the back (straight) leg. With the shoulders held back, the chest is opened and the spine extended. It also tones the ankles and feet.

### warrior 2 (virabhadrasana 2)

This open-leg position strengthens the abductors (outer thigh muscles), stretches the adductors (inner thigh), strengthens the side of the calves, ankles, and gluteal group (buttock muscles), opens the hip joints, and expands the chest.

### warrior 3 (virabhadrasana 3)

This may be one of the best positions for rebalancing your posture, since it lengthens and strengthens the legs, back, shoulders, and arms, tones the ankles, and focuses the mind.

### downward-facing dog pose (adho mukha shvanasana)

This easy inversion brings blood to the head and upper body. It strengthens the back, arms, shoulders, and front legs, while stretching the hamstrings and calf muscles.



### **shoulderstand (sarvangasana)**

The shoulderstand stimulates the glandular system, relaxes the neck and shoulders, strengthens the arms, and increases cranial and upper body circulation. It is especially helpful for those who sit a lot, as it reverses downward pressure on the organs.

### **cobra (bhujangasana)**

This pose opens the chest and contracts the upper back muscles (rhomboids and trapezius) that keep our shoulders from rounding forward. Perfect for counteracting chair-bound bodies, it also strengthens the muscles of the gluteal group (buttocks), posterior leg, and back.

### **locust (shalabhasana)**

The unsupported backward-bending poses strengthen and bring more blood supply to the spinal muscles (which also nourishes the spinal discs) and strengthen the arms, the backs of the legs, and the buttock muscles.

### **bow pose (dhanurasana)**

The bow pose quickly reverses the rounded shoulders and weak lower back that are part and parcel of occupational sitting.

### **uddiyana bandha**

Abdominal muscles that have become weak from extended sitting need to be strengthened to support proper positioning of the pelvis and to sustain good posture.

### **sage twist 3 (marichyasana 3)**

Twisting poses release tension from the back muscles and bring a fresh supply of blood to the spinal discs.

### **corpse pose (shavasana)**

Because you are lying stretched out for an extended period of time, the muscles and the fascia covering them (that have adopted the chair position) begin to lengthen. Shavasana is relaxing and energizing—it is always the best way to end any asana practice.

