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A simple sequence to support your immune system.

In the body, the main agent of our immune system is our blood, a clear fluid (plasma) containing red and white blood cells. It is the white blood cells which inhibit the invasion of the blood stream by bacteria and viruses. The production of antibodies is a major function of the immune system and is carried out by special white blood cells called B cells (B lymphocytes). Antibodies can be triggered by and directed at foreign proteins, microorganisms, or toxins - antigens. An immunoglobulin is a specialized immune protein produced because of the introduction of an antigen into the body, and which possesses the remarkable ability to combine with the very antigen that triggered its production.

There is increasing evidence demonstrating the relationship between emotional stress and the depletion of our immune system. Research shows how the immune system appears to benefit from the practice of yoga by encouraging 'coherence', as opposed to 'chaos', in the rhythm of the heart beat.

Immunoglobulin A (IgA) is the body's front line defence against infectious agents. IgA is present in all the mucous membranes of the body. When volunteers were asked to recall an occasion when they became stressed or angry, thus inducing a chaotic heart rhythm, the secretions of IgA dropped for an average of 6 hours. Negative emotions appeared to have a negative effect on their immunity, unless the volunteers had learned how to induce 'coherence'. Research showed that those who had learned simple techniques for quietening their heart and brain through yogic breathing techniques could maintain coherence in the heart rate, and thus reduce the likelihood of a drop in their IgA levels.

We have two types of immunity – natural and acquired. Natural immunity is non-specific, and you could say that someone with a 'strong constitution' probably has good natural immunity. In contrast, the body can also acquire immunity, through its response to infection or vaccination. Yoga strengthens both types of immunity, and the following sequence will do just that.

You will need a bolster or cushion, a mat, a chair, and a folded blanket.

If you are in good health, practice the whole sequence. Take your time to become familiar with the techniques. There are no wrong yoga poses, just wrong ways of doing them. Keep your jaw, tongue and eyes soft. Relax your facial muscles.

If you have been ill and are recovering, practice the last two poses **ONLY**.

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Supported Passive Back Bend

Place a folded blanket at the top end of your mat, and your bolster across your mat about a third of the way down. Sit on your mat in front of the bolster with your legs bent, feet flat on your mat. Roll down over your bolster so that your back ribs come to rest on it, your chest lifts strongly up, and the back of your head rests on the blanket beyond. Your shoulders will be in mid air and your arms will be on the floor at shoulder height, just beyond the bolster. Look at the picture to get your position correct before you finally stretch your legs out straight and relax. If you find the stretch intense at first, have more height in the blanket under your head, and/or put a cushion under your hips. As you become familiar with the pose, reduce the height of the blanket, and try without the cushion. Once you have mastered the position of your body over the bolster, it is also pleasant to push the soles of your feet into a wall. The pose should feel relaxing. Stay here, breathing evenly for 3-4 minutes. To come up, bend up your knees and roll over to your right hand side to push yourself up from the floor. Do not sit straight up!



Supta baddakonasana

Place the folded blanket at one end of your bolster. Sit on your mat at the other end of your bolster with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Slowly roll down along the bolster, bringing the soles of your feet together and drawing your heels towards you. Arrange the support for your knees so that there is no strain on your inner thighs, using yoga bricks or cushions to support your knees and a strap around your feet to draw them close. Arrange the folded blanket under your head and neck, not your shoulders. Stay, breathing quietly and naturally, for 2-4 minutes. Slowly lift your knees together, roll to one side and push the bolster away. Take your feet wide on the mat, with your knees still bent up, resting your inner thighs. Then roll over to your right side, and push yourself up to sitting. (Don't sit straight up - you'll undo all the good work you have just done!)





Adho Mukha Svanasana

Hold the sides of a chair firmly and walk your feet slowly back until your body and arms are at full stretch, your legs are vertical with your feet hip width apart and parallel. Straighten your arms, rolling your shoulders away from your neck and feel the sides of your body begin to stretch. With your back flat and your legs vertical, you will feel your trunk begin to extend deeply and your spine lengthen. Now work up from your heels, pressing them down, stretching your calves, opening the backs of your knees and lifting your kneecaps up, pressing your thighs back, and lifting your buttock bones up. Roll your upper arms outwards, drawing your shoulder blades away from your ears. Keep your breathing soft and your neck and jaw relaxed. Walk towards your hands to come up. Repeat three times, allowing the stretch to penetrate a little deeper each time.

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Salamba Sarvangasana
If you are familiar with the pose and have your own blocks, you can do your normal shoulder-stand and use your chair to take your feet over into Halasana. Stay for four minutes breathing quietly.

From the sofa – place a bolster or cushion on the floor by the sofa, where your feet would normally be. Sit on the sofa and swivel all the way round, so your legs are over the back of the sofa, your bottom on the seat towards the back for support. Gently lower yourself down until your shoulders are resting on the bolster or cushion and your lower back is resting on the seat. Your legs and feet will be up over the back of the sofa. It should feel very comfortable, with no strain in your head, ears or eyes. (You might slip off during the first couple of attempts! Ask someone to help guide your shoulders to the cushion if this happens.) When you are comfortable, stay for four minutes, breathing quietly and normally. As you slide off the sofa onto the floor, you will come to rest in the pose below. Stay for 4 minutes before rolling to your right to come up.



Legs over a chair
Put a chair sideways on your mat with a folded blanket on the seat. Sit down close to it, swinging your legs over the seat, and lie with your back on the floor and your legs resting over the seat of the chair. The edge of the seat should come right into the backs of your knees, so your calves rest completely on the seat. If you are less than about 5'6" tall, you might be more comfortable with a block under your hips. If you are over 5'9", you will find more height on the chair seat more comfortable. Roll your shoulders back and have your hands either side of your body, palms facing upwards and fingers relaxed. Close your eyes and rest for 3-5 minutes, keeping your jaw relaxed and your mind focused on your gentle, steady breathing. When you feel ready, roll over to your right side and stay resting there for a few moments before you come up to sitting.



Savasana
Sit in the middle of your mat with your knees bent. Roll slowly down, keeping your spine straight, roll your shoulders back and take a folded blanket for your head if it feels 'thrown' back. Place a bolster under your knees and extend your legs over it. Let your legs relax completely. Draw your shoulder-blades down your back, lift your chest and roll your shoulders to the floor. Have the backs of your hands on the floor or bend your elbows and rest your hands on your tummy, elbows out. Relax your face, your jaw and close your eyes. Take your tongue away from the roof of your mouth. Stay, breathing quietly, for up to 5 minutes. To come up, bend up your knees again and roll onto your right side. Rest here and push yourself up to sitting when you feel ready.

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