

Inversions – and Why Do them?

A yoga teacher's suggestion to invert has the power to elicit a range of emotions from students—bewilderment, fear, anxiety, aversion, rejection, excitement, butterflies, or _____ (you fill in the blank). There are also other types of fitness instructors who do not find or recognize any benefit to inversions.

Purposely turning ourselves upside down is contrary to our human physical locomotion-nature and yet the benefits of upending ourselves are many. Just as yoga gently encourages us to move away from any unconscious habitual patterns, the invitation to invert is simply another way by which to shake things up, step out of the rut. Walking on our legs as opposed to our hands is perhaps the most glaring habit of humankind, and so inversions have the potential to be a valuable addition to our lives.

An inversion is most generally categorized as any asana in which the head is below the heart. And while headstand, handstand, forearm stand, and shoulder stand immediately come to mind, there are gentler variations that may be more accessible for most students: Downward Facing dog, standing forward folds, legs up the wall, upward thread-the-needle, and happy baby are lovely ways in which to get things moving in new directions without jumping right into the deep end.

Like all things in life, the suggestion to get upside down should not be universally prescribed. There are certain contraindications that should be observed so as not to cause or exacerbate previous injuries or illnesses: un-medicated high blood pressure, some heart conditions, neck injuries, recent stroke, detached retina, glaucoma, and epilepsy are common issues that should be addressed before inverting. Talk with your doctor and your yoga teacher if you are unsure about your status.

Additionally, the debate continues as to whether women on their “ladies time” should indeed take a vacation from inversions. I would suggest doing a little research for yourself, both in an academic as well as experiential sense—listen to your body and what feels appropriate as you move through your cycle. This might mean abstaining from or simply holding inversions for shorter periods of time—you are the ultimate judge and the ultimate controlling factor of your own body.

Without further delay, ten compelling reasons you should finish reading this Healthy News and get upside down:

Inversions reverse the blood flow in the body and improve circulation:

Work smarter, not harder! Use gravity to provide the brain with more oxygen and blood thus increasing mental functioning, and improving concentration, memory, and processing abilities.

Increase immunity and prevent illness:

The lymphatic system is a key player in keeping the body healthy. As lymph moves through the body it picks up toxins and bacteria to be eliminated by the lymph nodes. Because our lymphatic system does not have its' own pump, lymph moves as a direct result of our muscle contractions and gravity. Getting upside down allows lymph to more easily travel into the respiratory system where much of the toxins enter the body.

Energize:

Feeling that afternoon slump coming on? Get upside down! Inversions get more blood moving to the brain, which results not only in physical invigoration but mental revitalization as well.

Relax:

While the heating inversions (handstand & supported shoulder-stand) energize, inversions of the cooling type (shoulder stand & legs up the wall) work to calm the nervous system, thereby activating the parasympathetic nervous system and producing feelings of balance and calm.

Improve balance:

Up the challenge! Once balancing on one or two legs has been mastered, the obvious next step is finding balance upside down, on either your hands, head or shoulders

Increase core strength:

Shoulders and arms—especially for women who tend to be stronger in the lower body, inversions create body balance by developing upper body strength.

Literally give us a new perspective on life:

As we become accustomed to reacting to our world in a predictable way, inversions teach us through metaphor that there is always another way to approach the situation/person/problem.

Inversions are fun:

Inversions reintroduce us to our inner child and remind us that while yoga is a contemplative endeavor in many ways, the asana practice is also a time to be playful and light hearted!

Inversions are fantastic all year long, but in the winter months they may be especially beneficial. For many of us winter comes with it chilly days and more time spent indoors. There is a natural biological tendency to draw inwards, conserve energy, and move more slowly.

So while there is certainly validity to the idea of paying attention to one's internal seasonal moods, for many, the world around them does not abide by the same clock. And so while it may be more of a challenge to incorporate inversions into one's practice during the quiet months, doing so may serve as a natural-caffeine-free way to bust out of the wintertime doldrums and access hibernating stores of internal energy.

To balance out the cerebral work of reading this, you may now move to your mat and/or a wall and get upside down!

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Rev. Nancy A. Nester MsCD, DD, RMT, ChT, HSH-PT
(CYT-320, RYT-200)

Plexus Worldwide Senior Ambassador #1804617

Clear Light Arts, ADL

PO Box 1500

Cleveland, GA 30528

706-865-0322

yoga@clearlightarts.org

www.ClearLightArts.org