

A home practice to build a strong back

By Jamie Elmer

YOU DEPEND ON THE STRENGTH and flexibility of your spine for nearly everything you do, from walking and sitting to coming into Balasana (Child's Pose) and Handstand. In order to move through the wide range of motion you task your spine with on a regular basis, you need it to be both strong *and* flexible—and twists are one of the best ways to achieve both goals. That's because twisting has the potential to help decompress the discs and elongate the spine, opening the spaces between the vertebrae, activating

the muscles around the discs, and increasing blood flow to the spinal area to deliver pain-fighting, healing, anti-inflammatory oxygen.

Practicing this twisting sequence is beneficial for anyone who sits for a good portion of the day, suffers from chronic back pain, or loves activities that don't incorporate a lot of spinal rotation, such as running, cycling, and hiking. Breathe deeply as you wring out your spine, and enjoy the added mobility, strength, and pain relief you experience in your back as a result.

Practice tips

1. Keep your breath long, smooth, and steady. The deeper you breathe, the more length you'll gain in your spine.

2. To help you rotate when twisting, recruit your core muscles rather than your shoulders and neck. This will protect your spine and help you twist more safely.



1 Side Stretch

Starting on your back, reach your arms overhead and behind you, and stretch your legs long on your mat. Flex your ankles and spread your toes and fingers. Grab your left wrist with your right hand and reach both hands toward the top right of your mat, while bringing your feet over to your mat's bottom right. This position will stretch and lengthen your entire left side body. Take 3 long inhales and exhales, and then repeat on the second side.



2 Windshield-Wiper Twists

Still on your back, take your arms out to a T, palms turned up. Bend your knees and place your feet flat on your mat, slightly wider than hip-distance. Inhale, and on your exhale gently drop your knees to one side while rolling your head in the opposite direction. On an inhale, bring your head and knees back to center. Repeat 3 times on each side.



3 Seated Twist

Sit tall with your legs extended, feet at mat width. If your hamstrings are tight, bend your knees so that you can sit directly on your sitting bones. On an inhale, sweep your arms forward and up; on the exhale, sweep one arm down and back and your other arm forward until your fingertips reach the floor between your legs, twisting to one side. On the next inhale, sweep both arms forward and up; on your exhale, change sides. Repeat 3 times on each side.



4 Plank Pose

Place your palms directly under your shoulders and extend your legs back. Press firmly through the mounds of your hands and index-finger knuckles, root your toes down into the mat, firm your legs, and lengthen from the crown of your head through the soles of your feet. Hold the pose for at least 3 slow breaths.

PHOTOS: JEFF NELSON; MODEL: JAMIE ELMER; STYLIST: TINA GILL; HAIR/MAKEUP: SHELLEY KAMSTRA; TOP: ATHLETA; BOTTOMS: THE OM COLLECTION

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5 Adho Mukha Svanasana
Downward-Facing Dog Pose

From Plank, exhale your hips up and back to Downward Dog. Breathe deeply as you relax your head and neck and lengthen your spine. Sense as much length through both sides of your waist as possible, and use the strength of your legs to lengthen your heels down. Hold for at least 3 breaths.



6 Downward Dog, with side stretch

Stay in Down Dog, and as you exhale, drop your heels to one side, bringing your hips with you in order to lengthen your side waist. On an inhale, come back to center with your heels and hips; on your exhale, change sides. Repeat 3 times on each side.



7 High Lunge, with simple twist

From Downward Dog, exhale your right foot forward between your hands. Keep your front shin vertical and stay balanced on your back toes as you lift your back thigh. Come high onto your fingertips and take full breaths as you lengthen your spine. On an inhale, use your stomach to twist, and reach your right arm skyward. On your exhale, bring that hand back down. Repeat on the same side 3 times, then hold the twist for 3 breaths. Step back to Down Dog; switch sides.



11 Prasarita Padottanasana
Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend

With your feet still wide, turn your thighs and toes in slightly. Inhale and circle your arms out and up. As you exhale, hinge forward from your hips and bring your hands to the mat. If your hamstrings feel tight, bend your knees. Clasp your big toes with your first two fingers and thumb. Bend your elbows out to the sides and lengthen your spine. Draw navel to spine, press down through your feet, and breathe your shoulders up away from your ears. Stay for at least 3 breaths. On an inhale, bring hands to hips and press down through your feet to rise.



12 Parsvottanasana
Intense Side Stretch, with backbend

From Mountain Pose at the top of your mat, bring your palms to the back of your pelvis, fingers pointing down. Step your left foot back one leg's length and turn your back toes to the front left corner of your mat. Press both feet down and straighten both knees. Breathe deeply and lift your chest skyward. Lift the front of your pelvis as well as your chin, and gaze. Hold for at least 3 slow breaths, then look forward; on an exhale, step your back foot forward and change sides. To finish, return to Mountain Pose.



13 Parivrtta Trikonasana
Revolved Triangle Pose

Step your left foot back and position it as in pose 12. Inhale both arms overhead; exhale and hinge forward, lengthening your spine. Using your stomach, twist to the right and bring your left hand to the floor, your shin, or a block, and your right arm to the sky. Reach back through both thighs as you lengthen forward through the crown of your head. Place your gaze where it feels best. Take at least 3 deep breaths. On your last exhale, gently fold forward. Bring your hands to your hips and inhale to rise. Repeat on the second side.



8 Plank Pose, with Twist

From Down Dog, move forward to Plank, bringing your feet and toes as close together as possible. Keep both hands on the floor and your chest square with the floor. Rotate your heels and hips to the left, working toward stacking your feet and ankles, if possible. Hold for at least 3 slow breaths; return to Plank and change sides.



9 Downward Dog

This time in Down Dog, step your feet to mat width. Use your legs to lengthen your spine back and reach your heels down. Hold for at least 3 breaths. To come out, walk your hands back to your feet, bring your hands to your hips to stand up, and face the side of your mat.



10 Temple Pose, with twist

Turn your thighs, knees, and feet out 30 to 40 degrees. Slightly bend your knees as you hinge forward from the front of your hips, bringing your hands to your knees. Lengthen your entire spine, including your front, back, and side waist. Inhale, and as you exhale, twist your upper spine to the right, keeping your legs and pelvis completely still. Inhale back to center, and exhale to change sides. Repeat for a total of 3 twists to each side. To initiate the twist, use your abdominal muscles rather than your arms and shoulders.

OUR PRO Teacher and model **Jamie Elmer** is a traveling teacher and teacher trainer whose practice and teaching have been influenced by Max Strom, Saul David Raye, Shiva Rea, Erich Schiffmann, Sherry Brouman, and Annie Carpenter. To learn more, visit jamieelmer.com.



14 Happy Baby Pose

Find your way onto your back. From here, bend your knees to about 90 degrees, with the soles of your feet facing the sky. Hold the back of your thighs, your ankles, or your feet. Breathe as you gently lengthen your spine, widen your collarbones, and draw your knees down toward the floor. Hold for at least 5 breaths.



15 Supine Twist, with hip shift

Place your feet flat on the mat with your knees bent. Press your feet down, and set your hips off to the right. Bring your knees to your chest, and then drop them to the left to twist. Keep both shoulder blades on the mat and relax your legs and feet. If the top thigh doesn't relax, place a block between your thighs and squeeze. Either bring your arms to a T or use the pressure of your right hand on your top hip to lengthen your top side waist. Stay here for at least 5 deep breaths; change sides.



16 Savasana Corpse Pose

Rest on your back for at least 5 minutes, or longer if possible. Set up your body so that you're as comfortable as possible—for example, by placing a bolster or rolled-up blanket under your knees. Completely relax your breath. ☺