

Supta Virasana

Reclining Hero Pose





Supta Virasana is an extremely versatile posture. It gives a thorough stretch to the legs and abdomen, increases the mobility of the hips and spine, and opens the groins. Through the prism of this single asana, we see the entire subject of yoga encapsulated. The stretch given to the legs and the spine make it great for beginning a sequence. Its calming effect on the nervous system means it can be used for repose within a sequence. It has a powerful recuperative nature, making it a useful therapeutic tool for many ailments. Because it opens the chest and quiets the breathing, it is suitable for the practice of pranayama.

Yet despite this adaptability, many people find it very challenging – partly due to the inaccessibility of the final posture physically, and because the methods for modifying the pose are often confusing. Many find it daunting and balk at practicing it.

I went through this experience at the beginning of the year, fearing a pose I used to love. Supta Virasana was my best friend, the asana I'd take to a desert island. Then I had surgery to repair damage to the cartilage in my knee. While I was aware that there would be a recovery period for the knee, I wasn't prepared for the loss of flexibility in the joint. The knee just didn't want to bend anymore. The therapy prescribed by the physiotherapist focused solely on strengthening the leg. It was as if there was a resignation that the knee would not bend again.

II.2 samadhi bhavanarthah klesha tanukaranarthasca

The practice of yoga reduces afflictions and leads to samadhi.

Yoga is a hard taskmaster; it demands truthfulness and courage mixed with perspiration. It dictates that we probe that which we find most difficult. Not content to accept that the knee would atrophy and lose condition, I investigated what yoga recommended for regaining flexibility in the joint. Surprise, surprise... the obvious answer was to begin mindfully stretching the joint. So I went back to the beginning, relearning Supta Virasana, a blessing in disguise. I got to view the asana with fresh eyes, as a beginner would, re-living the very fears and pain that cause many to avoid the pose. By beginning the process of relearning the posture with limited flexibility, the road to recovery became clear. While the joint has not regained full flexibility, it has improved greatly. By trusting the method we have for this very versatile asana, the healing process began.

Sanskrit is a metaphorical language. Like yoga, it has layers of meaning. In the depth of metaphor, we are given insight into how the asana should be performed. Supta means lying down, but also means supine, relaxed, at ease, submissive. Vira means hero, warrior, or champion. Supta Virasana should be practiced with the grace of a resting hero – acquiescent, fearless, and sanguine.

I.3 tadah drastuh svarupe avasthanam **Then, the seer dwells in his own true splendour.**

Before attempting Supta Virasana, you need to be familiar with Virasana (Hero Pose). The actions of Virasana are maintained in the reclining version of the posture.

Virasana (Hero Pose)

Method of practice

Refer images 1a and 1b

Kneel on the floor with your knees and thighs together. Spread the feet apart, with the soles facing the ceiling. Keep the feet in line with the shins.

- Exhaling, lower your buttocks to the floor and sit between the inner heels. The heels need to be snug to the hips. The inner calves need to be snug to the outer thighs.
- Revolve the thighs and knees away from the centre line, so that the front thighs face the ceiling and the shins face the floor. Keep the thighs and shins compact.
- Observe that the centre of each kneecap is pressing into the floor.
- The front of the foot needs to spread and the metatarsals need to press evenly down. There should be a strong extension back from the inner heel to the big toe. The feet are active.
- Roll the outer shoulders back, keeping the collarbones broad. The shoulder blades should be pressed firmly to the back ribs.

- The torso needs to be centred directly above the hips. Stretch actively up from the outer hip sockets to the armpits.
- Keep the head straight and the gaze even. (For pranayama, the head releases down to the chest and the eyes are closed.)
- Initially maintain this position for a minute, breathing evenly through the nostrils. As experience builds, timing can increase (5-15 minutes).

Practice points

- Move the lumbar spine and back of the pelvis in without projecting the floating ribs forward.
- Press the sitting bones down while lifting the front of the hips. The entire trunk and abdomen need to stretch up.
- Learn to differentiate the diaphragm and lift it.

Working with props

- If you are unable to comfortably sit on the floor, you must elevate the pelvis with support. The sitting



bones must be grounded, not hovering.

- Belts can be employed around the thighs and calves to maintain the snugness of the legs.
- For pain and stiffness in the ankles, folded blankets under the shins will provide relief in the posture.
- Placing a firm roll behind the knee joint can alleviate discomfort in the knees. This is especially useful for cartilage damage.

Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero Pose)

Method of practice

Refer images 2a, 2b, 2c and 2d

- Sit in Virasana to your capacity, following the methods and techniques listed above.
- Holding the feet, exhale and arch back resting on the elbows. Extend the spine back as you press your buttocks forward.
- Exhale and arch the head backwards, resting the crown on the floor. Maintain this position for a couple of even breaths.
- Exhale and lower first the back of the head to the floor, then the

back ribs, and finally the spine.

- Lie flat until the spine is fully extended, spreading the shoulders away from the neck.
- Keep the arms to the side of the torso with the palms open to the ceiling and the fingers spread.
- Exhale and stretch the arms over the head without raising the shoulder blades from the floor. Keep the shoulder blades firmly to the back ribs.
- The arms need to be fully extended with the palms open to the ceiling. Keep the upper arm contained

into the shoulder socket.

- Don't allow the buttocks or knees to lift at any point.
- Press the thighs, knees, and shins firmly down.
- Initially stay in position for one to two minutes, breathing deeply (to capacity).
- To come up, place the hands by the hips and lift up evenly from the posture. Take care not to sway from side to side.
- Exhale and stretch into Forward Virasana.



2a



2b



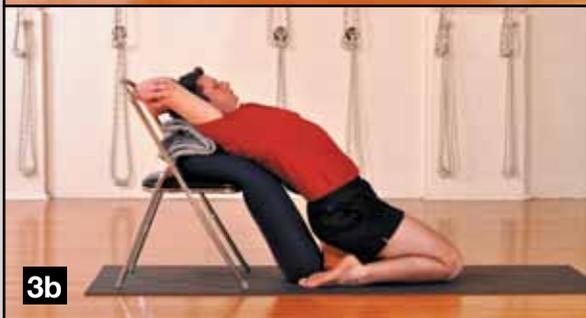
2c



2d



3a



3b

Practice points

- Don't push your buttocks to the spine as it causes the lumbar spine to arch. Lengthen the waist and lumbar to the knees. This way the lumbar spine can extend and the spine can rest on the floor.
- Extend the back ribs towards the head.
- Keep the buttocks grounded, while lifting the tailbone without tilting the pelvis up.
- Stretch the front of the body up from the inner plane of the pubis.

Working with props

Refer images 3a and 3b

- A rolled bandage can be placed lengthways under the tailbone to encourage the lifting action.
- Loss of flexion in the knee may mean people are sitting on considerable height in Virasana. It is important that you build up height under the head and the chest incremental to the pelvic support.
- The use of bolster support for the back helps people with lack of flexibility. You will need a bolster support under the chest if you are sitting on height, or if your knees lift when you extend into the pose.
- People often experience pain in the lower back when using a bolster. Often, pushing the bolster slightly away from the back of the pelvis alleviates this.
- The application of a folded blanket under the head ensures it doesn't tilt. It supports the cervical vertebrae and allows them to extend.
- Weight can be applied to the top of the thighs to encourage the area to release downwards.

Tips

- Work gradually and systematically with props. The props are there to help you access the benefits of the posture and lead you to the final form of the pose.
- Don't force the pose!
- Expect discomfort, but avoid pain.
- Avoid overstretching the knees. The knees need the stability given by their ligaments. By forcing the knee beyond its capacity, you can damage ligaments.
- Strengthen muscles around the knee. Don't practice the asana in isolation. Use it as part of a well rounded asana practice that includes standing poses.

Benefits of Virasana and Supta Virasana

In his excellent book *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health*, BKS Iyengar advises that Supta Virasana helps to develop strength and endurance, stretches the chest and increases the depth of breathing, and relieves stiffness in the joints. The posture confers a deep stretch to the legs, back, waist, and abdomen.

Supta Virasana helps with pain in the knees and increases their flexibility. The posture is especially good for the feet. Because of the stretching effect in the ankles and feet, proper arches

are formed. This posture is especially beneficial for refreshing weary and heavy legs.

Supta Virasana is one of the very few postures that can be practiced directly after eating, or when suffering from nausea and food poisoning, and it also aids digestion and soothes acidity.

The posture helps to strengthen the heart and prevents blocked arteries, increases the elasticity of the lung tissue, and enhances resistance to infection. Supta Virasana is calming and soothes the nerves. It regularises sleeping patterns and is suitable for the practice of pranayama.

Cautions

- If you have injuries to the knees or ankles, seek out the guidance of a certified Iyengar yoga teacher before attempting the pose.
- Do not practice the asana if you have a cardiac condition.
- During menstruation or pregnancy, women should use a bolster for support under the back.
- Avoid the posture if you are experiencing lower back pain.

Preparatory Asanas

1. Vajrasana and Supta Vajrasana (Thunderbolt Pose and Supine Thunderbolt Pose)
2. Virasana, and Virabhadrasana I and II (Warrior I and Warrior II Poses)

Tim Bosworth and Patrick Costello are certified Iyengar yoga teachers. They both teach at Clifton Hill Yoga Studio in Melbourne. www.iyoga.com.au

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