**Benefits of twisting**

When twisting we are basically compressing soft tissues along the axis of the twist, the axis being the spinal column. This is an everyday movement although in yoga we twist more consciously and to more of an extreme, moving the spine and the internal organs of the torso into compression so when the twist is released new energy is liberated. Indeed twists encourage us to breathe into different areas of the lungs, mobilising the ribcage and improving lung capacity.

Twists help us to release tension held deep inside the structures surrounding the spinal column, the contraction of the muscles brings strength, and the release from our twists activates the tendon reflexes of all the compressed muscles producing a relaxation response releasing chronic tension and creating more length in the spine; meaning twists develop both strength and relaxation. This action also assists the nervous system as spinal discs are compressed and then decompressed toning the nerves; and it greatly helps realign the body where there are structural imbalances and in particular back problems.

We are also literally massaging the body as we squeeze and release whether this done as we enter and leave the twist or as we stay and gently breathe creating subtle movement inside. Think of a sponge being wrung out as we release waste substances to be followed by the influx of new nutrients, meaning twists rejuvenate all of the internal organs having both a cleansing and nourishing effect.

Finally, the twisting effect upon the appendicular skeleton is very beneficial, increasing the range of movement of the shoulders, the arms and hands, as we release the neck region and the brachial plexus supplying nerves the arms and hands. We can also improve the mobility of the hips depending upon the positioning of the twist.

We must however ensure we do not move too deeply into a twist at first, as for all asana we go more deeply over time keeping the body moving with an inner sensitivity and structural integrity. There are some general principles we can apply to twisting:

General principles for twisting

* If we look at the spinal column then each part of the spine possesses a different ability to rotate. From the skull to C1 there is no disk and so no rotation is possible but between C1 to C2 there is a peg like pivot joint allowing the head to rotate. Between C2 and C7 the neck can freely rotate and as we move downwards into the thoracic vertebrae T1 to T12 again there is great freedom to twist since the vertebrae are perfectly aligned for this action, allowing around 30 to 40º of rotation. Yet as we move into the lumbar region of the spine from L1 to L5 twisting become difficult as these vertebrae are primarily designed for support allowing for only 5º of rotation.
* For all twists:
	+ the spine must initially be placed in an aligned neutral spinal position, especially keeping the lumbar curve natural, allowing neither a flattened or exaggerated lumbar curve. This may require some modification such as a block beneath buttocks for a seated twist or bending the front knee for a revolving triangle pose to maintain this ‘neutral’ position, especially when there is also flexion at the hips.
	+ keep the pelvis level. The foundation of the twist needs to be stable, whether it is legs & pelvis when standing or seated, or shoulders and arms when supine etc. When seated some authorities also suggest that we work on a blanket rather than a sticky tapas mat so the buttocks can shift a little if needed, so avoiding placing potential strain upon the sacro-iliac joint
	+ keep shoulders level to maintain structural alignment and the shoulder blades can be depressed and retracted to open the chest.
	+ focus upon the very top of the neck where it meets the skull, here it is worth gently tipping the chin up and down until students find a neutral head position where the neck feels long and open and the crown is rising effortlessly; avoid holding the chin upwards or downwards.
	+ as we enter we can inhale to lengthen the entire spine
	+ then exhaling begin to twist from the abdominal area, then twisting in the thoracic region and finally the cervical region. Think of a corkscrew action occurring throughout the length of the spine. Twisting in this manner means we are not leading with the head, which can destabilize the spinal movement causing us to move the various areas of the spine differently rather than as a whole. As we work from the lower spine upwards it also means that we are not bypassing ‘stuckness’ in the thoracic region by working primarily in the cervical region of the spinal column.
* Where the arms are involved we must also ensure we are not primarily twisting through the action of the arms. Eventually they can be used as levers to stay in the twist but the twisting action must come primarily from the inner body and the breath.
* Once we are in our twist make sure breathing has not been overly inhibited and stay and breathe gently awaiting the inner relaxation response or if we wish to work more actively we can gently contract the abdominals as we exhale so initiating another twisting action upwards through the spiral staircase of the spine. Always maintain an inner sensitivity recognizing if there is an excessive closing of the body or an opening of the body; if the body begins to close too much and the breath cannot be smooth and even, then we have moved too far compromising the integrity of the pose. Remember it is inner muscular effort and the breath creating the twisting action!
* We can teach simple twists at the start of a class and go on to teach more challenging twists later in the class, where using a short series of twists we can counterpose at the end with a symmetrical forward bend.

Good preparation for twisting

Generally lateral stretches are the best preparation for twists although good shoulder mobilisation and chest openers is excellent, as are hip mobilisers.

* Note: the lumbar area does not possess a significant capacity for twisting and so ensure that we do experience any discomfort in the lower back or the sacro-iliac joints; if there is any discomfort reduce the intensity by reducing the depth of the twist or modify the pose for instance:
	+ - For lying twists keep feet to the floor
		- For seated twists sit on a block or a blanket
		- For standing twists bend the front knee or place a hand to a block

## Areas for caution

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| --- | --- |
| Disc problems, especially in low back and spinal facet joint sprains  | Avoid strong seated & standing twists focusing upon gentle supported supine twists. |
| Hiatus hernia | No strong twists |
| Pregnancy and menstruation | No strong twists working only with open twists where the abdomen is not compressed |
| Inflammatory conditions such as crohns, ulcers, endometriosis etc.  | Only twisting on remission not when inflammation is present |
| Asthma and other respiratory conditions | Gradually increase intensity as may initially feel anxiety as breathing capacity is restricted |
| Scoliosis | Use a support beneath the ‘easy’ side to keep twist symmetrical |
| Neck problems | Reduce the degree of the cervical twisting action |
| Hip problems | For hip replacement where we must not adduct the leg i.e. cross the leg over the body on the affected side may need to practice a simpler twist such as bharadvajrasana or a sukhasana twist, otherwise we can keep the affected leg in alignment. |

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**Marichyasana: Sage Pose or Pose of Marichi**

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