

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (upward facing dog pose)

Pronounced oord-vah moo-kah shvan-aah-suh-nuh the word urdhva means upwards, mukha is face and shvana is a dog in Sanskrit.



This pose is named for the way in which a dog stretches out.

Teaching Points:

Stage one

Bhujangasana

- Can first explore cobra, and some students can stay here. Focus upon moving all areas of the spine, rather than those which move more freely.
- Hands either side of lower ribs, if possible (remember the lower down the body hands are placed, the deeper the backbend will be). Legs hip width or together if possible.
- If in deepest backbend elbows above wrists, and tucked into body as inhale and lift, moving forwards as well as upwards as lead with crown and sternum, keeping hips to floor; activate legs, try rotating inner thighs to ceiling and relaxing buttocks; press down upon tops of feet, keeping all toes to the floor, including little toes (this can help to activate quadriceps)
- Lifting the sternum, externally rotating shoulders, try to draw hands as if backwards to help open the chest.
- Keep the chin parallel to the ground to engage the hyoid bone, and the front of the body, only hyperextending at the neck if ready to do so.
- To exit, slowly lower feeling all muscles gradually releasing.

Stage two

Lift from prone

- In a prone position, legs together or at hip distance apart, chin to floor, hands placed either side of the lower ribcage, fingers spread wide
- Inhaling press tops of feet to floor as press hands down to the floor and as if moving backwards, lifting the chest, straightening arms. Draw collarbones apart, externally rotating the arms at shoulders, drawing chest forwards of arms.
- Check wrists are beneath shoulders, adjusting position of feet if needed
- Lift both hips and knees from the floor, keeping both legs active; may help to keep little toes firmly pressing to the ground and rotating inner thighs towards the ceiling, as keep buttocks relaxed. **If necessary can keep lower legs on the floor, or place padding, such as a bolster, beneath hips where we will press down into these areas and extend the spine.**
- Ensure the whole spine is lengthening, especially at the thoracic region where the **chest moves forwards of the arms**, lifting forwards and upwards, moving towards extension. **Can place hands on bricks to create more space in lower back.**
- Keep the chin parallel to the floor to engage the hyoid bone, creating length in the spine. Only lifting the chin into hyperextension of the neck if comfortable to do so.
- Ensure the lower back remains comfortable, because it is possible to create excessive lumbar extension when there is stiffness in the thoracic region; the hip flexors will have to be engaged to counteract this tendency and students may benefit from tucking the tailbone under and so can try this option if needed.

Later can transition from another pose....

We can move from Down Facing Dog or Plank to Up Facing Dog. It is also possible to enter through Chaturanga Dandasana which will require more strength and precision; here it can be difficult to move toes on a sticky mat but when we extend them and make sure they are taken back an inch or so, we can ensure the balance of the upfacing dog pose is maintained at the shoulders and wrists.

Note:

Limit the movement in the lumbar and cervical regions of the spine, **focusing upon the thoracic region.**

Ensure we have **explored the Upwards Facing Dog individually** prior to making challenging transitions!

Benefits:

- Develops confidence
- Tones leg muscles
- Enhances flexibility of back muscles
- Stretches chest and shoulder muscles
- Lifts energy

Good preparation

Creating flexibility in thoracic spine: twists, simpler backbends; developing flexibility in shoulders & chest; abdominal and back strengtheners; hip flexor releasers.

Cautions & possible modifications

- For back conditions: can practice soft bhujangasana or sphinx if needed
- For wrist conditions or injury: can practice soft bhujangasana or sphinx
- For pregnancy: caution with backbends, cat, cat balance or plank can be practiced
- For abdominal conditions: can practice cat, cat balance or plank if needed
- For HBP, Heart Conditions, Mature Diabetes: rest as needed

Remember we must always determine the main benefits we are seeking to derive from the practice of the pose, so for example for back conditions if we are focusing on the backbending component of the class then sphinx or cobra could be the best modification but if focusing on the weightbearing part of the pose then we might prefer to offer the cat lowering and lifting, plank or a version of dolphin etc.

Adjustments

- In the pose can gently smooth around the shoulders from front to back suggesting an external rotation and then slide hands downwards at shoulder blades inviting the student to retract and depress shoulder blades
- In the pose can place a hand across upper chest just beneath collar bones spreading hand wide to indicate opening at chest and can place a hand at thoracic spine to encourage straightening of the thoracic spine, asking students to move away from the hand, to help ensure we are not compensating at the cervical or lumbar regions.
- Remember for backbends it is the extension or straightening of the thoracic region, which dictates the intensity of the arch.