



Taking Care of Business

Here's the poop on keeping your bathroom visits regular and stress-free

by Joe Miller and Suzanne Ausnit

In dealing with discomfort, many of us try to push the sensation away, instead of relaxing into what is. This can happen on the yoga mat when we're faced with a challenging asana, but also, more prosaically, in the loo, when confronting a reluctant digestive tract. Unfortunately, straining can make constipation worse and lead to further problems such as hemorrhoids. The good news is that yoga can help, both physically through

asana and mentally through mindfulness practice.

Constipation has become prevalent today due to the lack of fiber in the modern diet and a sedentary lifestyle. The western toilet also plays a part; rather than squatting, we now sit, which may cause us to strain. And because we are often oblivious to the workings of our internal plumbing, we compound the problem with poor bowel habits.

On the track

Once food leaves the stomach, it passes into the small intestine, which absorbs nutrients. Whatever's left travels into the large intestine, which absorbs water, leaving a semi-solid waste product. As the stool nears the end of its journey, it arrives in the rectum, located directly in front of the sacrum. This triggers the defecation reflex, causing the rectum to contract and the internal anal sphincter to relax. If you're unable to go, however, the external, voluntary sphincter remains closed, and the contractions stop. The rectum then serves as a holding tank for the stool until you are able to expel it.

The defecation reflex is under the control of the parasympathetic nervous system, which deals with relaxation and digestion. The complementary sympathetic nervous system is responsible for the "fight-or-flight" response that comes with stress. So if you're feeling harried and rushed, you won't be able to go.

Don't hold back

If you're in the habit of holding it in, you may lose the ability to recognize the signal—a feeling of fullness in the

The Straight Poop

Staying regular is a matter of developing good habits. Add these simple steps to your morning routine to keep things moving smoothly.

1. As soon as you get up in the morning, drink a large glass of lukewarm water, with lemon if you like.
2. Spend a few minutes in a squat with your belly resting on your thighs to help initiate the defecation reflex. If you're losing your balance, lean your back against a wall.
3. Make sure you allow enough time in the morning so you're not rushing the process. If you're stressed, you won't be able to go.

rectum. Waiting too long causes a traffic jam in the colon. The passage of the stool slows, enabling more water to be absorbed. The result? Hard stools that are difficult to pass.

When that happens, the habitual response is to strain. Typically, we hold our breath and push, contracting the diaphragm and abdominal muscles to drive up the pressure in the abdomen. This maneuver (called a Valsalva maneuver) can send your blood pressure on a roller-coaster ride.

The Practice: Smooth Moves

The yoga poses shown here will help stimulate your bowels and keep your digestion on track. **DO NOT** practice them if you are pregnant, suffer from hernia or other serious abdominal problems, or have had recent abdominal surgery.



1. Apanasana

This helps open your hips for squatting and coordinates the compression and release of your abdomen with your breath.

- Lie on your back with your legs extended on the floor. Draw your left knee into your chest, holding your shin with your hands.
- As you exhale, draw your knee closer to your chest. As you inhale, release it slightly.



• Next, curl your torso up on your exhale, holding onto opposite elbows around your shin. Lower your upper body on your inhale. Repeat three times.

- Hold the curled-up position for five breaths, drawing your nose to your knee. Keeping hold of your elbows, slowly lower your torso to the floor, letting your knee draw in further with each exhale. Hold for five breaths. Breathe into your belly, letting your exhale be passive.

- Repeat with your right leg.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIDURA BARRIOS, www.vidura.net, HAIR & MAKEUP BY TIFFANY C. REID; HER PANTS BY BE PRESENT; HIS TEE SHIRT BY I LOVE YOGA; MODELS: JOE MILLER & SUZANNE AUSNIT.

Toilet training

One way to change your bowel habits is to develop an attitude of mindfulness. Notice when you feel the urge to go, and try not to suppress it. The rectum will feel stretched and heavy, like an overstuffed pouch. When you're sitting on the toilet, resist pushing and simply observe the sensations. You will feel the sleeve of the rectum contracting and shortening as the anus relaxes. This shortening action of the rectum, like sliding the wrapper up along the length of a straw, leaves the stool outside the body.

As with any yoga pose, try not to deal with uncomfortable sensations by holding your breath. You will notice over

time that you have less need to push. Straining causes the rectum to lose its tone and can lead to hemorrhoids. Instead of using your abs and diaphragm to do your dirty work, let the muscles of your rectum direct the evacuation.

Yogis traditionally identify the source of elimination as the energy of apana, the downward-flowing prana. Connect to this energy to allow this flow to occur naturally rather than forcing it.

As you become more mindful of this process, you may begin to notice a feeling of profound well-being afterwards. A good poop has a cathartic effect, since the stretching of the rectum stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, initiating a relaxation response. 🧘

2. Belly Jellyroll

The weight of your body resting on the roll lets you use gravity to passively compress the abdomen. (Do not practice this if you are pregnant or have any serious abdominal conditions.)

- Fold a yoga blanket accordion-style to make a bolster about four-feet long, then roll one end up like a jellyroll.
- Lie on the blanket with the rolled-up portion in your lower belly, just above your pubic bone. This may be initially uncomfortable, but use your breath to relax into the pressure.
- Breathe into your belly, letting your exhale be passive. Rock your hips from side to side. Bend your knees and move your legs from side to side, like a windshield-wiper.
- Follow with three rounds of Kapalabhati breathing, once with the roll in center of the lower belly, and then leaning to the left and right.



3. Child's Pose Belly Massage

Stress plays a part in constipation. Child's Pose soothes your nervous system, while your fist in your belly brings gentle pressure to the ascending and descending colon.

- Sit on your shins, and make a fist with your right hand and cover with your left hand.
- Place your fist into your right belly and fold forward into Child's Pose. Gently press your fist into your belly on your exhale. If you feel a strong pulse under your fist, shift the hands, as you don't want to compress the aorta.
- Repeat on the left side.



4. Malasana (Squat Pose)

After a lifetime of sitting in chairs, many of us have difficulty squatting comfortably. Squatting, unlike sitting, aligns your digestive tract, applies pressure to your abdomen, and opens your pelvic floor, making it an ideal prep for emptying your bowels.

- Squat with your feet about hip-width apart, resting your belly against your thighs and holding opposite elbows. Point your feet and knees in the same direction. (For additional pressure, place a pillow or folded blanket between your belly and thighs.)
- Remain here for a couple of minutes, breathing into your belly. As you inhale, your diaphragm compresses your colon against your thighs, encouraging your stool to move into your rectum. If you have low blood pressure, be sure to come out of this pose slowly or you may find yourself feeling faint.

Note: If it's difficult to maintain your balance, extend your arms forward, hold onto a heavy piece of furniture (or an obliging friend), or squat with your back against the wall. If your heels are off the floor, place a rolled blanket under them.



5. Uttanasana (Forward Bend)

As you breathe in this mild inversion, your belly gets gently massaged and stimulated.

- Stand with your feet hip-width apart and fold at the hips.
- Relax into the pose, holding opposite elbows. If you want more pressure against your abdomen, place a folded blanket between your belly and thighs. Hold for five to 10 breaths.



8. Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose)

In this traditional twist, the ascending portion of your colon is compressed against your right thigh, followed by the descending portion against your left thigh.

- Ground through both sitting bones evenly. Hug your right knee with the crook of your left elbow. As you inhale, reach the right arm overhead, lengthening the right side of the body.
- As you exhale, bring your arm behind you, twisting your trunk to the right.
- Continue to lengthen your spine with each inhale, inching your ribs up your thigh as you breathe into your belly.
- Deepen the twist with your exhale. Visualize widening your upper inner thighs away from each other while drawing your left belly and right inner thigh toward one another.
- Repeat on the left side.



6. Butt Cheek Twist

Alternating contractions of the left and right psoas muscles (the large hip flexors that lie behind the intestines), along with the engagement of the abdominal muscles, churn and compress your belly.

- Sit with your forearms on the floor behind you, knees bent, and feet flat on the floor. Lift your feet.
- Exhale and roll onto your right buttock as you strongly pull your knees in toward your chest.
- Inhale and extend your legs out in front at approximately 60 degrees. Keep your belly drawn in as you inhale to fully support your lower back.
- Repeat to the left, alternating side to side five times.



7. Jathara Parivartanasana (Revolved Abdominal Pose)

This vigorous twist wrings out your abdomen like a sponge.

- Lie on your back, with your knees bent into your chest and arms extended out to the side in a "T" with the palms facing down.
- Exhale, roll your knees toward your right armpit. Inhale, pause, hovering your knees above the floor.
- Exhale to the left side and repeat.
- To up the ante, extend your legs during the pause on your inhale, before bending them to rotate to the opposite side. If your abs are strong enough, try this with straight legs from side to side.



Suzanne Ausnit is a senior teacher at Devotion Yoga in Hoboken, New Jersey. Her website is fullpotentialyoga.com

Joe Miller is a senior teacher at OM Yoga Center in New York City, and frequently teaches anatomy for yoga. He is currently working on a master's degree in applied physiology through Columbia University.

9. Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose)

This pose helps open your pelvic floor.

- From all fours, slide your left knee behind your right. Widen your feet apart, and sit between your heels. If it's difficult to sit upright or if you experience any knee pain, place a block or folded blanket beneath your sit bones.
- Make a fist with your left hand and wrap your right hand around your left. Place your fist in your right belly and fold forward.
- Belly breathe, relaxing on your exhale.
- Repeat on the other side.

