

Robin Candrea of Dancing Foot Yoga

was interviewed and quoted extensively in this

December 2008 FIT YOGA magazine article.

(The photos are not of her.)



Walk past a full-length mirror at the mall or the gym and, suddenly, you pull your belly in, draw your shoulders back, and lift your head nice and tall. Your reflection reveals you as a symbol of confidence and grace.

Yet turn away, and you soon revert to your slouchy self, the ghost of Shaggy: shoulders rolled forward, collapsed chest, and a head so far forward, it arrives a few seconds before the rest of you.

Robin Candrea has practiced perhaps the two best means to perfect posture: dance and yoga. Twenty-five years as a professional modern dancer taught her poise and proper alignment. She could jump, turn, and leap without ever losing form. Yet, when she hung up her dance shoes, she discovered yoga to be a natural complement.

"Yoga is very similar to dance in that both teach you how to present yourself with your head balanced over the body, shoulders back, chest broad, all while maintaining the natural curve of the spine," say Candrea, who is now an Iyengar yoga teacher and co-director of Dancing Foot Yoga in Red Bank, New Jersey (dancingfootyoga.com). Yoga, like dance, is about developing fluid movements and a healthy shape you can easily maintain when you walk, sit, run, dance, or just hang out.

Ever watch co-workers at their desks or strangers stroll down the street? Often, their shoulders draw up around their ears and roll forward, which gives them a rounded upper back. Athletes are often no different. "Their self-image is often limited to building strong

Office Break

Having grown tired of my low back giving out by day's end, I recently purchased a \$300 ergonomic office chair. It works well, but humans weren't built for marathon sitting. Even the best chair technology can't fully protect me from my computer's magnetic pull that draws my shoulders forward and sucks my chest back into my spine. When that happens, I close my office door and re-align my entire body with this quick, three-pose break:

1. Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) with your back at the wall. Close your eyes and take several deep, steady breaths as you seal your buttocks, upper back, shoulder blades, and head into the wall's support. It makes you conscious of standing tall with an expanded chest and curved spine.
2. To lengthen your spine and re-align your body when it feels like a closed accordion, go upside down into Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand). Use the wall for support.
3. Finish with Vrksasana (Tree Pose). It not only aligns your body from the head down but also encourages you to stand in perfect posture formation. (Perform at the wall for help with balance.) Try to mimic it when you sit down again. —M.S.

muscles and a superb cardio system," Candrea says. "They're in great shape but often so tight they can't stand up straight. Or when they run, it's with a curved upper back, revealing tight shoulders, hip flexors, and hamstrings that can result in injury. Then, they come to yoga class for relief."

Both groups need to learn to come down, so to speak, she says, by lowering their shoulders and keeping the

Supine Chest Opener



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTEN E. TRIEGER, MODEL: RENEE BRODMAN

chest broad and wide. But the rest of the body needs to align too. To keep a natural, curving healthy spine, you also need to maintain a neutral pelvis, not tucked or pushed forward, and hamstrings that are toned, not short and tight. Otherwise, you'll sag forward like snow-covered tree limbs.

You don't need a special posture routine to shape up your shape. Candrea offers these poses for you to weave into your regular routine. If your posture needs a major rehaul, though, perform these asanas as a sequence several times a week. You may find the next time you meet your reflective self, you won't have to change a thing.

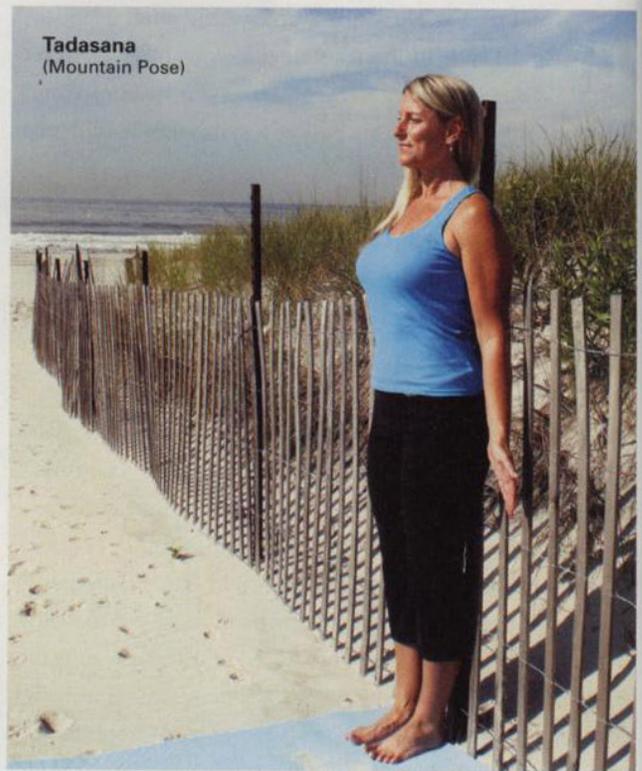
Open your chest

Your chest not only affects how you stand, but how well you move, says Candrea. "If you scrunch up your shoulders around your ears, your chest collapses and your heart and lungs become restricted," she says. "Create more space here and you create a healthier posture that transfers energy through your whole body."

The **Supine Chest Opener** releases your shoulders and aligns your upper back. Place a rolled-up blanket on your mat horizontally. Lie down with the roll under the bottom tips of your shoulder blades. Stretch out your legs forward and your arms out to the sides. Hang out here for a minute or longer, and notice how much easier it is to take full breaths. The pose lengthens your trapezius muscles, those twin diamond-shaped muscles that run down from your neck to below your shoulder blades and lateral to your spine. "These are the muscles that lift your shoulders to your ears all day long. We need to learn how to relax them," Candrea says.

Find awareness

The classic **Tadasana** (Mountain Pose) may look like nothing special, but there's plenty going on there. "It's the shape we take in most everyday situations," says Candrea. "It's how we greet people." First, it promotes physical awareness, from your feet up to your head. Stand consciously in Tadasana, and you become aware of how your body is positioned in space. How's your balance? Are your toes and heels evenly grounded? Do your knees roll in or out? Is your pelvis centered? Can you draw a straight line from your tailbone to the top of your head? Is your chest lifted and collarbones broad? Are your shoulders ahead of your hips or in line with them? Is your head floating on top of the spine? And finally, how are you breathing?



Tadasana
(Mountain Pose)



Ardha Uttanasana
(Half Standing Forward Bend)

Take an L formation

Poor posture often arises from back muscles that need strengthening and chest muscles that need stretching. We carry the world on our shoulders, which become tired and tight. "We forget about our back bodies, much of the time because we can't see them," Candrea says. "We're so focused on our front body, the back becomes a foreign place. We need to get to know our

Hip Action

The ideal posture is a nice, neutral position, says Robin Candrea, co-director of Dancing Foot Yoga in Red Bank, New Jersey. You don't want your hips thrust too far forward or tucked too far back. Try this test from Candrea to measure your pelvic action:

From Tadasana (Mountain Pose), raise your arms overhead and fold into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend). Stay here for several breaths, then rise to Tadasana again. Take special note of your hips. Did you push them too forward or backward? Repeat the cycle and focus on keeping your pelvis in the same neutral position when you bend forward and when you come up.

backs better." Forward bends are ideal back stretches as they bring greater awareness to aligning the hips, knees, and feet. She suggests **Ardha Uttanasana** (Half Standing Forward Bend) standing at the wall and using a chair. You'll give your back a nice, long stretch even if you're wound too tight and have trouble going into the full fold.

Align your feet under your hips with your heels and buttocks touching the wall. Fold forward, and rest your arms and hands on a chair. "You should resemble an 'L' with a straight back and your hips and legs grounded to the wall," she says. Stay in the pose for up to a minute, engaging your front thighs (quadriceps) by lifting your

kneecaps, so the backs of your legs (hamstrings and calves) get a good stretch.

Get upside down

Proper alignment also means centering and evenly distributing your weight. For more advanced yoga students, **Handstand at the Wall** is one of the best poses for learning alignment, as it helps you fully extend and lengthen your body," says Candrea. A wall offers support so you don't tumble, but work up to it gradually. When you're feeling more confident in the pose, move your legs off the wall one at a time and see if you can balance, a great test of alignment, "If it's off, you won't be able to hold the pose," she says.

Cross the bridge

One pose that does it all—lengthens, strengthens, and opens the chest—is **Setu Bandha Sarvangasana** (Bridge Pose). When you rise into the full pose, your hips open, your hamstrings engage, the front of your body receives a deep stretch to promote elongation, and your chest fully broadens, all of which you want to feel when you are standing. When you come out of the pose, come back to stand in Mountain Pose and feel the difference. 🧘

Contributing editor **Matthew Solan** tries to stand up straight in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana
(Bridge Pose)

