



## Sweet Dreams: Yoga for Insomnia Relief

*Sleep is that golden chain that ties health  
and our bodies together.*

— Thomas Dekker

By Cheryl LeClair

**T**hirty to 40 percent of adults say they have some symptoms of insomnia within a given year, and 10-15 percent of adults say they have chronic insomnia according to the National Center of Sleep Disorders Research and the National Institutes of Health.

Yoga is an effective, natural technique for the treatment of insomnia. The practice of yogic breathing exercises, called pranayama; yoga postures, known as asana; and practices like direct observation, body awareness and meditation all offer natural relief from sleepless nights.

Chronic stress is frequently a factor in sleeplessness. When the nervous system is aroused, the body produces stress hormones, such as cortisol. Numerous studies have shown that yoga is effective in lowering high levels of cortisol. It decreases the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, the “fight or flight” response, and activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the “rest and digest” response. In this way, yoga can induce a state of calm that promotes a good night’s sleep.

An active yoga practice early in the day promotes the release of tension. A calming yoga practice in the evening, a few hours before bedtime, promotes relaxation and sleep. Restorative yoga is particularly effective, as it allows the body to relax deeply, both physically and mentally and is an excellent prelude to a restful night. Forward-bending yoga postures, in general, reduce tension; calm the mind, and allow us to turn our senses inward. If you have osteoporosis or low back pain, seek qualified assistance before attempting forward

bending postures. A well-trained yoga instructor will offer safe modifications of the poses to accommodate your particular condition.

The complete, or deep, three-part yoga breath known as dirgha breath, relaxes the body and mind and teaches proper diaphragmatic breathing.

Begin by lying down and placing one hand just below your navel and the other hand on the upper chest touching collar bones. As you inhale, draw the breath deep into the lungs allowing the lower belly to expand with air. Feel your hand on the lower abdomen rise. Allow the ribs to expand outward. Bring the breath all the way up, the collar bones will raise slightly. Exhale from the top down, allowing the collar bones to release, ribs move inward and the navel contracts inward toward the spine at the end of the exhale. Repeat and gradually allow the three-part breath to become one long smooth inhale and exhale. Count your inhalation and exhalation. Gradually begin to extend the exhale. If you inhale to the count of four, then exhale to the count of six. The deep, even breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for relaxation. This is an excellent technique to practice to facilitate falling asleep when going to bed or if you wake up in the middle of the night.

Observing the breath is a simple method of meditation and calms the mind. Gently close your eyes and observe your breath. Don’t try to change the breath, just observe the flow of air in and out of the nostrils. Listen to the sound of the breath. Observe the sensation of the breath moving in and out

through the nostrils. Notice if the inhale and exhale are equally smooth and even. If you find your mind wandering, simply visualize pushing the thoughts away and bring your attention back to your breath. If you find your mind going in all directions, you are not alone; this is typical. Developing concentration requires practice. Your practice will eventually reward you with calm, relaxed presence and deep, healing sleep.

Before beginning to practice yoga consult with your healthcare provider. Seek the guidance of a knowledgeable yoga instructor and discuss any conditions or concerns. He or she will be happy to guide you to a safe and relaxing practice.

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## Cat Pose or Marjaryasana

Kneel with the knees in line with the hips. The wrists, elbows and shoulders are perpendicular to the floor in tabletop position. Fingers should be spread and pointed forward. Keep the back straight as you inhale. As you exhale draw the navel toward the spine and arching the back up and release the head toward the floor. Tuck the pelvis.

*Caution: Use caution with this pose if you have a neck injury. Keep the head in line with the torso.*



## Cow Pose or Bitilasana

Kneel with knees in line with the hips. The wrists, elbows and shoulders are perpendicular to the floor in tabletop position. Fingers should be spread and pointed forward. As you inhale, lift your sitting bones and chest toward the ceiling and allow your belly to move toward the floor. Lift your head and look forward.

*Caution: Use caution with this pose if you have a neck injury. Keep the head in line with the torso.*



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