

Seven Essential Poses for Crossing the Menopausal Bridge

By Suza Francina, R.Y.T.,

For women at midlife and beyond, yoga offers a primary form of menopause medicine that can help them adjust to hormonal changes and cope with a wide range of symptoms—including hot flashes, night sweats, heavy bleeding, mood swings and fatigue—without negative side effects.

For the past thirty years, my classes have been filled with women who began yoga during the menopausal years. Now that I'm fifty-five years old and officially in menopause (defined as that point in time when a woman's periods stop permanently) my yoga practice is more important than ever. Even a short yoga session works wonders, especially when practiced with the help of props. During the year that my periods stopped, I told my students that yoga bolsters are my "menopause medicine". "And," I added, "you will not hear about a study ten years from now saying bolsters are bad for you!"

I often remind my students who are in the perimenopausal (premenopause) years, that if you practice yoga before menopause, then all the poses that are especially useful for coping with uncomfortable symptoms are already familiar, and you can reach for them like a nurturing and supportive friend.

Yoga's Unique Benefits During the

Menopausal Years

Yoga reduces the effects of menopause's hormonal changes by balancing the endocrine system. It smoothes out the hormonal and glandular changes that take place during this stage of life. The regular practice of all the categories of poses—standing, sitting, lying down, backbends, forward bends, twists, and inverted (upside down) poses—stimulates and activates all the glands, organs, tissues and cells of the body. Yoga's inverted poses are particularly important during menopause as they have a powerful effect on the neuroendocrine system, allowing fresh, oxygenated blood to flow to the glands in the head and neck.

A woman's body is quite capable of adjusting to the hormonal changes that occur when the ovaries slow down. If all our other glands are functioning well, they will, in most cases, continue to produce all the hormones a woman



needs for the rest of her life.

It's important to bear in mind that all menopausal symptoms are related and using yoga to ease the unpleasant effect of one symptom generally leads to better health in the rest of the body. Every yoga pose has a multitude of effects on all the systems of the body.

No aspect of yoga is more important for women crossing the menopausal bridge than to take time to practice yoga's restorative poses—passive poses where the body is completely supported by yoga props. Props help you stay in poses for a longer time and conserve your energy, allowing the nervous system to relax. This is especially important during times like menopause when women often find themselves in a vicious cycle of feeling “too tired to exercise,” and then feeling even more tired because they are not exercising.

Yoga Bolsters—Menopause Medicine

Yoga bolsters provide a firm support for the entire length of your spinal column, from the lower back to your head, when you are lying down. The muscles of your abdomen, chest and back release their tension, lengthen and relax deeply. Bolsters are specifically designed so that the sides of your rib cage open and expand over the bolster and move downward toward the floor. When your rib cage expands laterally in this manner, your breathing capacity naturally deepens. The bolster leaves a vital, lasting impression on the body of what it feels like to have the chest open and free. Keep your yoga bolsters in plain view so that they call to you, to remind you to take time to stretch and relax—just like your toothbrush reminds you to brush your teeth. When tired, get in the habit of lying down on your bolster in “The Goddess Pose” (Supported Lying Down Bound Angle Pose) or other restorative pose.

Most restorative poses can be safely practiced on their own. For example, if you are feeling tired, practice Supported Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose or Supported Lying-Down Bound Angle Pose for ten minutes. If you have twenty minutes, practice both or stay in one pose longer. Do not be in a hurry. It is far better to do fewer poses in a peaceful, leisurely way



than to rush through too many. There will be days when it is a blessing just to be still and rest deeply in one pose for as long as you like.

After a long stay in restorative poses, you will feel and look like you've had a massage and a facial. Your face and whole body will feel smoothed and soothed, from the inside out. Your eyes will look clearer and brighter. You will look at your world as if from the top of a mountain. The deep rest, peace and quiet you experience with restorative yoga is a doorway to meditation.

In all poses (and in all of life) keep your abdomen soft, your chest open and your breath flowing.

Place your props for the following poses on a yoga mat so they don't slide. As you read the descriptions that follow, be aware that in practicing yoga, there are subtle adjustments and refinements that cannot be covered in the space of an article. A qualified teacher can give you specific, individualized instructions and show you how to make these healing poses truly comfortable.





Supported Lying Down Bound-Angle Pose - The Goddess Pose (*Supta Baddha Konasana*)

This supremely nourishing pose is essential for replenishing energy reserves during the menopause transition. This pose places the abdomen, uterus, ovaries and vagina in a position that frees these areas of constriction and tension that inhibit balanced hormonal activity. Blood flow is directed into the pelvis, bathing the reproductive organs and glands and helping to balance hormone function. The centering, balancing effect of this pose helps reduce mood swings and depression.

In this pose we are practicing what yogis refer to as “deliberate stillness.” We give the mind and body a chance to integrate and also let go of the past. If you have trouble sleeping soundly, practice this pose before going to bed or if you cannot fall back asleep.

How to Practice: Sit in front of the bolster placed lengthwise behind you, the soles of your feet together. Place a folded blanket at the top of the bolster to create a comfortable support for your head and neck. Loop a strap behind your back, at your sacrum (near your tailbone, not your waist). Bring it forward, around your hips, across your shins, and under your feet so that the soles of your feet are secure. Secure the strap in such a way that it is not too tight or too loose.

Place a folded blanket (or yoga block) under your outer thighs (and forearms, if needed, to be comfortable). Place an eye bag over your eyes to help quiet the movement of your eyes and help your brain to relax (Fig. 1). Stay in the pose for 10 minutes or longer. To come out of the pose, place your hands under your thighs and bring your legs back together. Remove the strap and straighten your legs,



allowing them to fall evenly away from the midline. When you feel ready, bend your knees, turn to your side, and use your hands to help you slowly sit up.

When you come out of Lying Down Bound-Angle Pose, you can turn and face the bolster and relax in Supported Child’s Pose.

Supported Child’s Pose (*Adho Mukha Virasana*)

For those moments when you feel like you’re falling off the menopausal bridge and wish you could either stay in bed or run off and have a “crone’s year alone,” try kneeling



on the floor, hugging your bolster and retreating for a few minutes into Child's Pose. It gives you the opportunity to take a break and detach yourself from the sometimes seemingly impossible demands of life.

This comforting, restful pose helps calm your nerves and emotions, helps lower blood pressure and feels wonderful on your back.

How to Practice: Sit on your heels with your knees on the floor, about hip-width apart. Place a bolster or two folded blankets in front of you and lean forward until your torso and head are completely supported. Turn your head to one side (Fig. 2). Give yourself several minutes to relax and feel the soothing effect of the pose. Remember to breathe softly, slowly, and truly "hug" your bolster. Allow yourself to sink into the bolster, relax and let go. Turn your head the opposite way before sitting up.

Supported Downward Facing Dog Pose (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*)

Downward Facing Dog Pose inverts the internal organs and increases blood flow to the brain, helping to counteract lapses in memory that can occur at moments of hormonal fluctuation. This pose helps lift and tone your uterus, improves circulation to your pelvis and strengthens the pelvic floor. It is a key pose for easing hot flashes. A weight bearing pose for the upper body, it strengthens the bones in the hands, wrists, arms and shoulders, thus helping to prevent osteoporosis. Resting your head on a bolster or folded blankets, as illustrated, makes the pose more restful.

How to Practice: From Supported Child's Pose, come to your hands and knees. Bring your knees back in line with your hips and place your hands on either side of the front edge of the bolster. Position your feet hip width apart, curl your toes under, press your hands firmly into the mat and, on an exhalation, straighten your legs so that your body forms the shape of a dog stretching (Fig. 3). When you come down, separate your knees and come back to Supported Child's Pose.

Supported Shoulderstand with



Chair (*Salamba Sarvangasana*)

This is the queen of all the yoga poses during menopause! It removes fatigue, helps relieve insomnia, soothes jittery nerves, calms the mind and smoothes out the emotional highs and lows so common during menopause. It is a key pose for pelvic health, cooling hot flashes, balancing the endocrine system, and giving the whole body a "spring cleaning".

How to Practice: Place a sturdy chair on a non-slippery surface and place a bolster or two folded blankets directly in front of the chair legs to support your shoulders. Place a folded sticky mat or folded blanket over the front edge seat of the chair. Sitting on the chair, bring your legs over the back (Fig. 4). Holding onto the chair, lower your shoulders to the blankets and the back of your head to the floor (Fig. 4B).

Supported Half Plow Pose with Chair (*Ardha Halasana*)

This is another key pose for relieving hot flashes. A long stay in this pose quiets the sympathetic nervous system so that the whole body feels profoundly and deeply relaxed.

How to Practice: Note in the photo that the legs are supported by the chair seat, allowing your body to relax completely while your organs invert. Place two folded blankets on top of a sticky mat with the smooth edges near the legs of the chair. Lie on your back with your knees bent, your shoulders on the blankets and your head under the chair seat. As you exhale, bend your knees and lift up your bottom and legs over your head so that your thighs are completely supported by the chair seat. Move your chest toward your chin as in Shoulderstand. Relax your arms back, palms facing up (or place your arms at right angles) and close your eyes (Fig. 5). Relax here as long as

you like—at least three to five minutes, breathing deeply.

Come out of the pose by placing your hands on your back and slowly come down, one vertebrae at a time.

Supported Bridge Pose-The “Menopausal Bridge Pose” (*Setu Bandha Sarvangasana*)

Supported Bridge Pose is restful for the heart and may help balance blood pressure and hormonal secretions. This pose has a calming effect on the mind and nervous system and is recommended for relieving mood swings, hot flashes and tension headaches. Placing your head lower than the rest of your body with the chest open is soothing and refreshing, and removes lethargy and depression.

Supported Bridge Pose helps regulate and balance blood pressure. Women are more prone to elevated blood pressure when the protective effect of estrogen is withdrawn. As you stay in the pose, feel the effect deep inside the whole belly area. The effect of dropping the belly, uterus and ovaries in the pelvic bowl helps to balance the hormonal secretions and thus helps ease the hormonal fluctuations of menopause.



How to Practice: Place two bolsters or stacks of folded blankets in a straight line. Position yourself near the end of the bolsters so that when you lie down your head is near the far end. Slowly slide off the end until the back of your head and shoulders rest flat on the floor. Your feet should rest comfortably on the bolster (Fig. 6). Stay in Supported Bridge Pose for 5 minutes or longer. When you feel ready to come out, bend your knees, slowly turn to your and sit up. Turn around, face the bolster and briefly go back into Supported Child’s Pose.

Supported Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose -The Great Rejuvenator (*Viparita Karani*)

[Two Photos –show variation, Supported Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose with feet wide apart]

Few things are easier and more refreshing, especially after standing upright for long periods of time, then simply lying on your back and elevating your legs up a wall or other surface. This is a safe and soothing way for women new to yoga to become accustomed to inverting their body. Practice this daily if your legs and feet swell easily, or if you have varicose veins.

This is a key pose for replenishing your adrenal reserves. During the year that my periods stopped, especially on hot days when the heat added to a sense of fatigue, I practiced Supported Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose for at least fifteen to twenty minutes every day, often much longer.

How to Practice: Place a bolster or two folded blankets about 2 inches away from the wall. Sit sideways on the bolster so your right hip and side are touching the wall. With the bolster under your bottom, lower yourself back, using the support of your elbows and forearms, and swivel around to take your right leg and then your left leg up the wall (Fig. 7). Stay in the pose for 10 minutes or longer. If you are tired, it is natural to fall asleep in this pose. When you are ready to come out, bend your knees, turn to your side, and relax on the floor for a few more breaths before you slowly sit up.

Suza Francina is a certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher and author of Yoga and the Wisdom of Menopause: A Guide to Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Health at Midlife and Beyond (Health Communications, Inc., 2003). For information about Suza’s workshops, visit www.suzafrancina.com.