

By Carol Krucoff

At the end of a long workday, the last thing I feel like doing is cooking. I'd much rather shut myself in a quiet room, light a scented candle, turn on soothing music, and do some yoga to unknot the physical and mental kinks from my day.

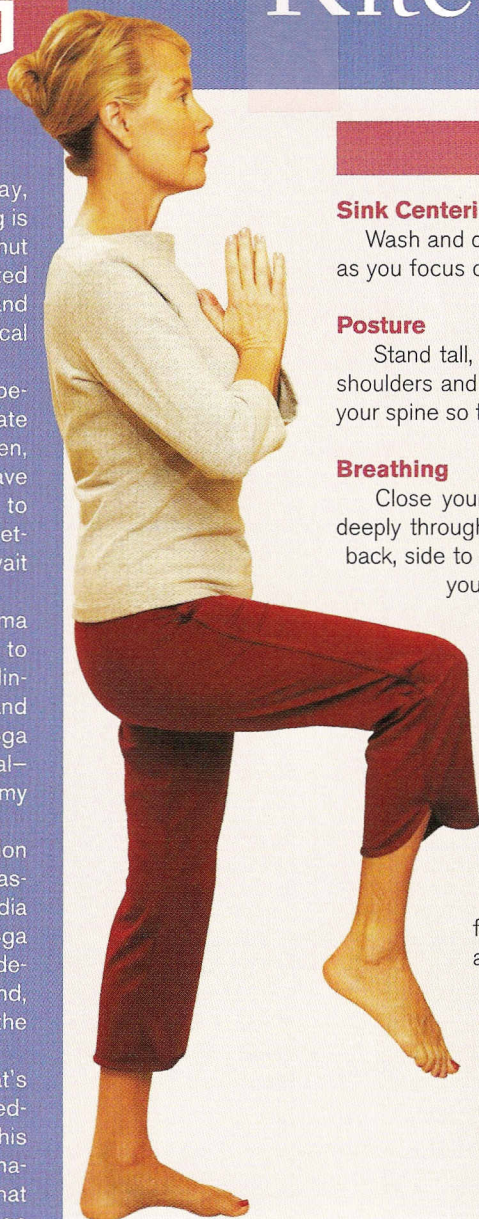
Sometimes I do just that, then begin cooking in a much brighter state of body and mind. But all too often, other priorities prevail: The kids have a music lesson or sports practice to attend, my husband or I have a meeting—or everyone is too hungry to wait for dinner.

After struggling with this dilemma for years, I've developed a way to have my yoga practice and make dinner, too. I call it Kitchen Yoga, and it integrates the components of yoga with the tasks of preparing a meal—but please don't think I stand on my head while stirring the soup!

Despite the popular misconception that yoga is a trendy form of gymnastics, this ancient discipline from India is much more than a workout. Yoga means "union," and the practice is designed to help unify body and mind, with the ultimate goal of uniting the individual with the universal.

The physical form of yoga that's become so popular in our stressed-out culture is just one aspect of this 5,000-year-old tradition. Called *hatha yoga*, it's a self-care system that helps release tension and enhance health. Proper breathing, posture, and concentration are all essential elements of this discipline, which—at its heart—is a moment-by-moment practice of awareness that you can interweave with anything you do. For example, sitting at your computer with good alignment and taking a deep breath when you're stuck in traffic are easy ways to take yoga off the mat and into daily life.

Applying yoga principles to cooking takes a little preparation. First, change into comfortable clothes. If you like, kick off your shoes and put on some soothing music. Begin your Kitchen Yoga practice with this simple transition (above right), designed to help you let go of the "busy-ness" of the day and embrace the present moment.



Begin: The Transition

Sink Centering

Wash and dry your hands, then rest them lightly on the edge of the sink as you focus on three key elements—posture, breathing, and awareness.

Posture

Stand tall, with your weight evenly distributed on both legs. Relax your shoulders and arms, release your tailbone toward your heels, and lengthen your spine so the crown of your head extends toward the ceiling.

Breathing

Close your eyes and visualize your lungs as two big balloons. Inhale deeply through your nose, expanding your lungs in six directions—front to back, side to side, and top to bottom. [NOTE: It's just one breath in which you try to expand your lungs in every direction.] Exhale completely, engaging your abdominal muscles to expel all the used air. Then relax your belly as you fill your lungs with another deep abdominal breath. Take three more slow, deep breaths, observing how your abdomen expands and contracts with each one.

Awareness

Release all thoughts of the past and let go of all plans or concerns for the future. Bring your attention to where you are right now, in the present moment. Scan your body, looking for any areas of tension or tightness. If you find any "dis-ease," send breath to that place, inviting softness and release.

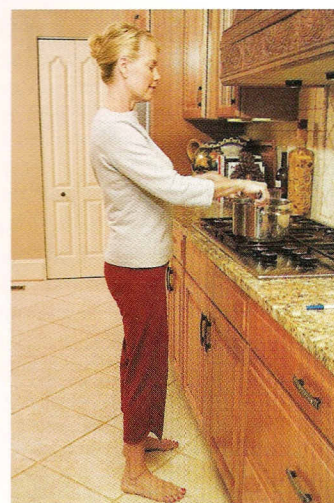
Open your eyes, and as you go about the varied tasks of dinner preparation, be sure to maintain good posture, breathing, and awareness. Be keenly aware of what you're doing—smell the fragrance of the spices, feel the coolness of the water on your hands, and have respect for the heat of the stove. Never compromise safety, but whenever you have a minute or two—say, while waiting for water to boil—try these poses.

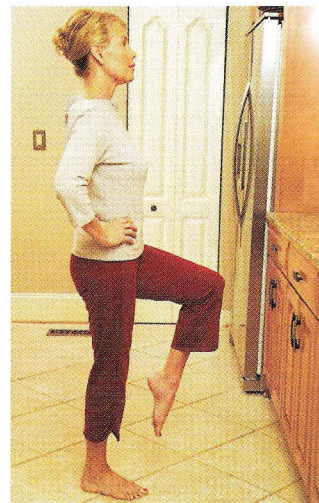
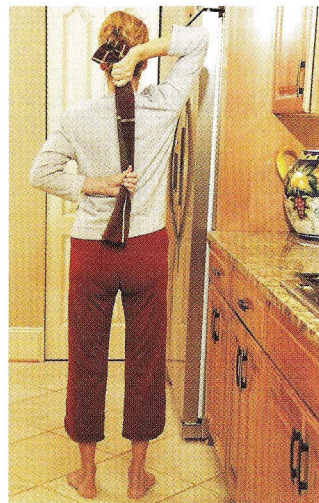
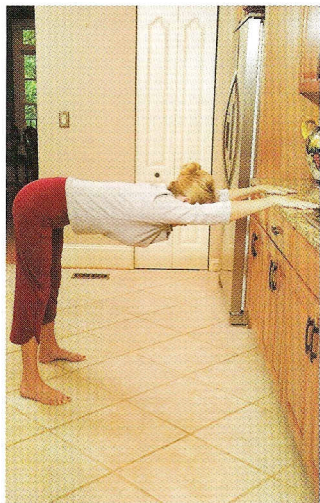
Kitchen Yoga Poses

1 Active Mountain

During any standing activity—such as washing vegetables, chopping onions, or stirring a pot—stand as tall and stable as a mountain. Root down through your feet and lengthen up through the crown of your head. Stack your joints so that if someone were looking at you from the side, they'd see your knees over your ankles, hips over knees, shoulders over hips, and ears over shoulders. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down away from your ears as you use your arms and hands to cook.

For extra challenge: Maintain good posture as you use your nondominant arm and hand to cook.





2 Counter Dog

Place your hands on a countertop, fan out your fingers, and press down evenly with both palms. Move your feet back so your upper body straightens, forming a right angle with your lower body at the hips. Inhale deeply, then exhale and extend your hips back, feeling the stretch running from your hands to your tailbone. Keep your knees soft and feel a stretch in the backs of your legs as well.

3 Standing Backbend

Stand tall in front of a countertop and place your hands on the surface. Keeping your elbows tucked in to your sides, press your palms and fingers on the counter as you inhale and lift your sternum (breastbone) and gaze toward the ceiling. Keep your lower back long as you take three slow, deep breaths.

4 Dishtowel Shoulder Opener

Hold a dishtowel in your right hand and raise your right arm. Bend your elbow so it points toward the ceiling and the dishtowel rests along your back. Stretch your left arm behind your back and bend your elbow to reach up and grab the dishtowel. "Walk" your hands toward each other, being sure to keep your spine long. Take three slow, deep breaths, then switch sides.

5 Stork

Stand in Active Mountain (see above), lightly touching a countertop for balance. Root down through your right leg and raise your left leg so the knee forms a 90-degree angle. Look straight ahead and relax your lower right leg. Take three slow, deep breaths, then switch sides.

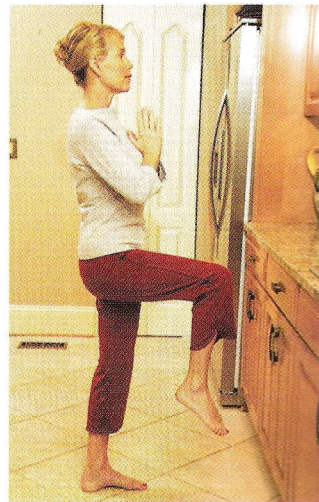
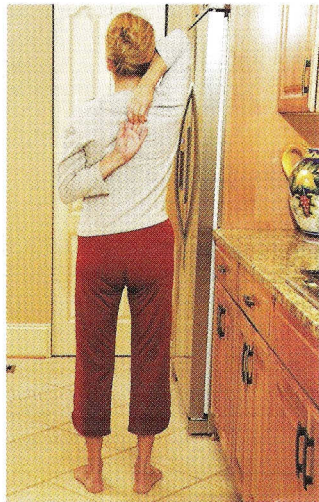
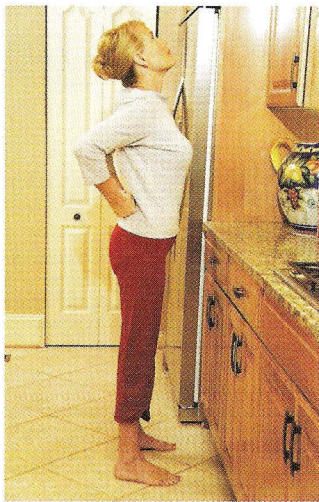
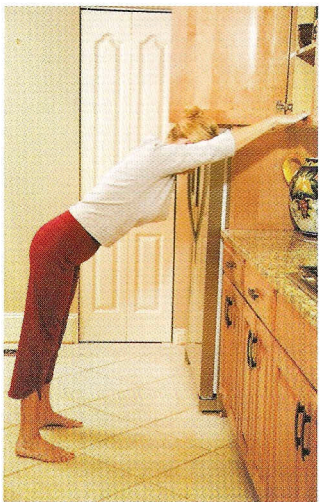
For extra challenge: Try the pose with your hands at a different height, such as on a shelf.

Modification: Place your fists on your lower back to ease any tension in that area.

For extra challenge: Clasp your hands behind you without using a dishtowel.

For extra challenge: Place your hands in "prayer" position and balance on one leg.

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Carol Krucoff, R.Y.T., is a registered yoga teacher and coauthor, with her husband, Mitchell Krucoff, M.D., of Healing Moves: How to Cure, Relieve, and Prevent Common Ailments with Exercise.