



Vrkshasana

Tree Pose

[vrick-SHAAH-suh-nuh]

Vrksha is the Sanskrit word for “tree.” In Vrkshasana, the one-legged balance is reminiscent of the strength and energy in the trunk of a tree. The roots, represented by the standing foot, press down into the earth for support, and the branches or hands extend up ever taller toward the sun. Standing as a tree, you are strategically balanced so that energy comes up to your standing foot from the earth and you use gravity to your advantage as you press downward.

Many trees have roots on top of the earth, but the roots anchor into the ground. The part of Vrkshasana that represents roots anchoring into the ground is the force, or energy, exerted by gravity on the standing foot. Reciprocally, energy is drawn upward through the trunk of the body, while the arms stretching overhead are like branches reaching for the sun. This action allows the ribs to lift and expand the diaphragm, thus enabling more expansive breaths.

DESCRIPTION

Vrkshasana, like all single-legged balance postures, should be practiced equally on both legs. Vrkshasana and Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle) work well together because of the muscular engagement needed to stabilize and open the hips. In fact, many people prefer practicing Utthita Trikonasana before Vrkshasana to prepare the hips for deeper external rotation.

ENERGETIC FOCUS

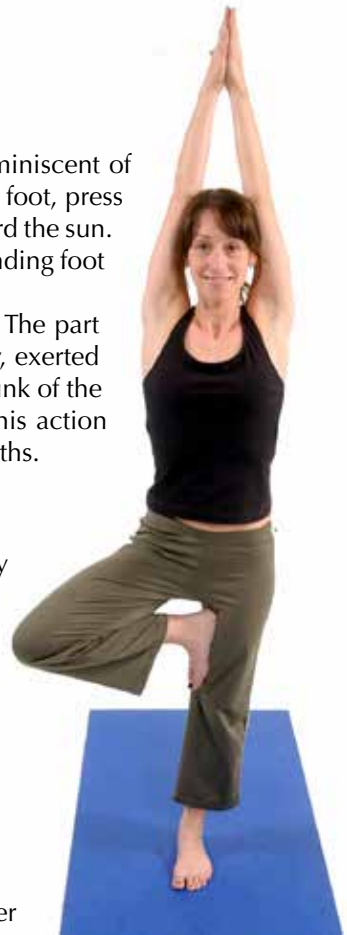
First chakra (Muladhara) grounding energy

FOUNDATIONAL FOCUS

Root through the metatarsal heads and the heel of the standing foot. Press the inner thigh of the standing leg and the sole of the non-weight-bearing foot toward each other.

BENEFITS

- Builds concentration, focus, and postural balance.
- Reduces stress—it is nearly impossible to worry and remain balanced at the same time.
- Develops strength and stability in the feet and ankles.
- Stabilizes and strengthens both superficial and deep hip muscles.
- Is said to balance the pituitary gland because of the pressure on the first metatarsal for balance (pressure that in reflexology is said to affect the structures in the neck and head).
- Increases overall body strength.



⚠ CAUTION

High blood pressure—Students with this condition should refrain from lifting the arms overhead.

VERBAL CUES

- From Tadasana (Mountain Pose), find a point somewhere in front of you to focus on with your eyes turned slightly downward. Gaze forward on a motionless *drishti* and allow your eyes to remain softly fixed on the chosen point. Breathe deeply and feel your body come into alignment.
- Slowly and smoothly, shift your body weight more fully onto your right leg and begin to lift your left heel off the ground. When you feel stable on your right leg, exhale and draw your left knee up toward your chest. Find the balance on your right foot from front to back, redirecting the movement that naturally moves the body from side to side when standing on one leg.
- Connect even more fully into your right leg, feeling the energy from the ground lengthen your spine and being mindful not to let the left side of your pelvis drop lower than the right side.
- Keep your right hip pressed back; at first, it may feel almost as if you are overcompensating. Keep your pelvis square while you externally rotate your left knee out to your left side. Feel the front of your right thigh and the inside of your left knee reaching away from each other.
- Exhale and place the sole of your left foot on the inside of your right leg anywhere that you feel you are comfortably, yet challengingly, balanced. However, avoid placing the foot on the inner knee joint. Firmly press your left foot and your right leg into each other. Doing so helps draw energy into the midline of your body and helps you maintain balance.
- Moving slowly, place your hands in Anjali Mudra (Prayer Pose) with your palms pressed lightly together at the level of your heart. Remaining fully rooted to the ground, imagine all the energy in your body drawing inward toward the midline and upward toward the sky.
- Continue to focus on your breath.
- As you breathe in, slowly raise your arms overhead and feel your chest and ribs lift higher, away from your hips. Remain here for two to three more breaths.
- Slowly release your arms to your sides and set your left foot on the ground. Rotate your right foot in both directions and shake your leg out slightly to loosen up the joints of your right leg. Come back to Tadasana to prepare for the other side.

ADJUSTMENTS

Toes—Remind students to spread the toes for stability and to focus on keeping the balance between the front and back of the foot without clenching the toes. For a kinesthetic reminder, point to or lightly brush the tops of the toes. You can also press down into the first metatarsal (big toe) to help the student work from front to back instead of wobbling from side to side.

Hip of non-weight-bearing leg—Stand behind the student and place your hands lightly on the hips as you level them. Move slowly so that the student is not thrown off balance. If necessary, move the hip of the standing leg back into alignment over the knee.

Spine—Encourage length in the low spine by reminding students to lift the crown of the head toward the sky. You can lightly brush upward in the space between the shoulder blades.

Chest and ribs—Stand behind the student, placing your palms against the sides of the rib cage, and gently draw the ribs up. Alternatively, hold the student's upper arms so that you can support the student while promoting extension through the spine. Encourage the student to keep the pinky fingers touching as the arms are raised in order to maintain external rotation at the shoulders and keep the chest open. Standing behind the student works best because it requires little physical effort on your part and is less distracting to the student.

Shoulders—Place your hands lightly on top of the student's shoulders and remind the student to stay relaxed.



Adjustment: hip alignment.

MODIFICATIONS

Hip replacement—To avoid creating stress in the hip joint with its limited range of motion, instruct the student to focus solely on balancing on one leg with little if any external rotation of the bent leg. Invite the student to keep the toes on the ground and rotate on the ball of the foot to the first point of resistance in the hip.

Balance difficulty—Instruct students to keep the toes of the bent leg on the ground with the heel pressed against the straight leg or on a block to the side of the standing leg. Have students use a prop (chair or wall) as a sort of training wheel—that is, only as a way to regain balance if they tend to wobble.

Severe balance difficulty—Instruct students to place the foot of the bent leg on a block or step stool. This technique helps students work on opening the hips without compromising balance.

Pose deepening—Instead of placing the foot of the bent knee against the standing leg, direct the student to reach the foot across to the opposite hip into Ardha Padmasana (Half-Lotus) and wrap the same-side hand behind the back to hold the foot. If the student cannot quite reach the foot, she or he can use a strap.



Modification: balance difficulties.

Modification: pose deepening.

KINEMATICS

Students often complain that the inside of the standing thigh is “too slippery” and that they are therefore unable to hold the other foot against it. Generally, the problem does not really involve slippery pants or skin; rather, it is a matter either of not pressing the sole of the foot firmly into the opposite thigh or of not having adequate range of motion for that particular placement. If a student has enough flexibility and openness in the inner thigh to place the heel of the foot into the groin, he or she will gain significant stability in the posture.

Vrکشasana (Standing on Right Leg)

Body segment	Kinematics	Active muscles	Muscles released
Foot and toes (R)	Toe abduction, stability	Dorsal interossei, abductor digiti minimi brevis, abductor hallucis (C, I)	
	Toe flexion (pressure into ground)	Flexor digitorum longus and brevis, flexor hallucis longus (C, I)	
Foot and toes (L)	Toe extension	Extensor digitorum longus, hallucis longus (C, I)	
Lower leg (R)	Stability to counter body sway (muscles relaxing and contracting as necessary to maintain balance)	Gastrocnemius, anterior and posterior tibialis, flexor digitorum longus, flexor hallucis longus (C, E, I)	
	Knee extension, stability	Gastrocnemius (I)	
Lower leg (L)	Ankle dorsiflexion	Anterior tibialis, extensor digitorum longus, hallucis longus (C, I)	Gastrocnemius, soleus
Thigh (R)	Knee extension and patellar elevation	Quadriceps (C, I)	
	Stability and adduction (adductor magnus helping to extend knee)	Adductors (C, I)	

Body segment	Kinematics	Active muscles	Muscles released
Thigh (L)	Knee flexion	Hamstrings (C, I)	
Hip and pelvis (R)	Hip extension, stability	Hamstrings (C, I)	
	Hip stability	Gluteus maximus, medius, and minimus; deep external rotators* (C, I)	
	Pelvic stability	Rectus abdominis, quadratus lumborum, hamstrings (I)	
Hip and pelvis (L)	Hip flexion	Iliopsoas, rectus femoris (C, I)	Adductors
	Hip external rotation	Deep external rotators,* gluteus maximus (C, I)	
Torso	Spinal extension and stability	Erector spinae, quadratus lumborum (I)	
	Rib and chest elevation	Pectoralis minor (C, I)	
	Trunk stability	Internal and external obliques, rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis, quadratus lumborum (I)	
Shoulder	Adduction of scapulae	Rhomboids major and minor, mid trapezius (C, I)	
	Postural support in mid back and downward pull of scapulae	Lower trapezius (C, I)	
	External rotation of humerus	Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid (C, I)	
Upper arm	Abduction of humerus	Deltoids (C, I)	
	Depression of humeral head	Infraspinatus, teres minor, subscapularis (C, I)	
Lower arm	Pronation	Pronator teres, pronator quadratus (C, I)	
	Elbow flexion	Biceps brachii, brachialis, brachioradialis (C, I)	
	Wrist hyperextension	Extensor carpi radialis brevis and longus, extensor carpi ulnaris (C, I)	Flexor carpi radialis and ulnaris, palmaris longus
Hand and fingers	Finger extension	Extensor digitorum, indicis, and digiti minimi; lumbricales manus; interossei dorsales (C, I)	
	Finger adduction	Interossei palmaris, adductor pollicis (C, I)	
Neck	Neck extension, stability	Splenius capitis and cervicis, suboccipitals, semispinalis (I)	

*Obturator externus and internus, gemellus superior and inferior, quadratus femoris, and piriformis.

C = concentric contraction, E = eccentric contraction, I = isometric contraction, L = left, and R = right.