

RANJANA YOGA CLASS

Ashtanga Yoga

A Beginner's Guide

What the method is, how a class works, a gentle starter routine and honest safety advice

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General education only. Not medical advice. Speak with your doctor before starting any new practice.

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1. What Ashtanga yoga is

Ashtanga yoga (the word means "eight-limbed") is a dynamic, set sequence of postures linked with breath. It was popularised in the twentieth century by K. Pattabhi Jois in Mysore, India, and is closely related to Vinyasa and to what many people now call Power yoga. Not to be confused with the eight limbs of Patanjali, though the name refers to them.

Unlike classes where the teacher invents a new sequence, Ashtanga uses the same order of poses each time, often called the Primary Series. Many people like the predictability: once you know the order, you can practise on your own and notice your own progress.

The short answer

Ashtanga is a physically demanding, fixed-sequence style that links poses with breath. It suits people who like structure, but beginners should start with a shortened version, ideally with a qualified teacher.

2. Before you begin: safety first

General education only. Check with your doctor first if you are pregnant, have high blood pressure, a heart, lung, joint or spine condition, osteoporosis, an eye condition such as glaucoma, or have had recent surgery or injury.

Stop and rest if you feel:

- sharp, pinching or burning pain (a mild stretch is fine, pain is a stop sign);
- dizziness, nausea or breathlessness;
- numbness or tingling, or pressure in the head or neck.

A note on difficulty

Traditional Ashtanga practice is vigorous and can strain wrists, shoulders, hips, knees and the lower back if rushed. Beginners should learn the opening poses slowly and skip anything that hurts.

3. How a class works

Part	What happens
Opening chant (optional)	Some teachers begin with a short Sanskrit chant. You can stay silent.
Sun salutations A and B	Two flowing sequences that warm the body.
Standing poses	Forward folds, triangle, side angle, wide-leg folds and balances.
Seated poses	Forward folds, twists and hip openers.
Finishing sequence	Shoulder stand, fish pose and a seated breath practice, if your teacher includes them.
Rest	Lying relaxation at the end.

In a "Mysore-style" class, each student practises their own sequence at their own pace while the teacher gives individual help. In a "led" class, the teacher calls out each pose. Beginners usually start with a few poses and add more over weeks.

4. Breath and gaze

Ashtanga uses a steady, audible, smooth breath (ujjayi) and specific gaze points called drishti. The breath is the pacing tool: if it becomes ragged, you are going too fast. Gaze points help concentration. Both are easy to over-force. Keep the sound soft, and let the gaze be gentle.

5. A beginner starter routine (about 20 minutes)

Time	Practice	Notes
3 min	Warm-up: cat and cow, shoulder rolls, ankle and wrist circles	Easy breathing.
5 min	Sun salutation A, 2 or 3 rounds, slowly	Bend knees; step back instead of jumping.
5 min	Standing: forward fold, triangle, warrior II	Hold 5 breaths.
4 min	Seated forward fold and a gentle twist	No forcing.
3 min	Lying relaxation	Cover up. Breathe naturally.

Skip any jump-backs or jump-throughs at first. Those are advanced movements that load the wrists and shoulders heavily.

6. Beginner modifications

Pose	Make it easier
Plank / low push-up	Lower the knees; lower the chest instead of the low push-up.
Upward dog	Use cobra instead, with elbows bent.
Downward dog	Bend the knees; heels need not touch.
Forward folds	Bend the knees; rest hands on shins or blocks.
Seated poses	Sit on a folded blanket; use a strap.

7. Your four-week plan

Week	Focus	Length	What to notice
1	Sun salutation A, 2 rounds, plus lying relaxation	10 min	Can you breathe smoothly through each movement?
2	Add 3 standing poses	15 min	Are knees and wrists comfortable?
3	Add a seated fold and twist	20 min	Which poses feel stronger or easier?
4	Repeat full starter routine	20 min	Note what you would like help with from a teacher.

8. Choosing a class or teacher

A good Ashtanga class for a beginner is one where the teacher asks about injuries, offers modifications without fuss, and does not push you into jumps or deep poses before you are ready. Ask whether there is a beginner or fundamentals class, and how long the class is. A first class that leaves you pleasantly tired, not sore or breathless, is a good sign.

- Tell the teacher about any injury, surgery or health condition before the class starts.
- Ask which poses are optional. A confident teacher will say most of them.
- If a teacher dismisses pain as "part of the process", look for another class.

9. Practising at home

Home practice is possible once you know the poses. Start with a short routine, keep the space clear, and keep a note of the poses you want to ask your teacher about. Use online videos with care: they cannot see your body, and many show advanced versions. Do not follow a video that moves faster than your breath.

Rest days are part of the method. Many practitioners take one full rest day a week. If you feel tired, sore in the joints or irritable, take a lighter day with only a few poses and a long relaxation.

10. Honest expectations

Ashtanga is physically demanding and some people find the fixed sequence and focus on form very satisfying. Others find it too intense. Neither response is a failure. Try a few classes of different styles before deciding what suits you.

11. Common mistakes and fixes

Mistake	Fix
Jumping before the body is ready	Step back and forward slowly. Add jumps only with a teacher.
Copying advanced photos	Do the version that suits your body now.
Holding the breath	Slow down until the breath is steady.
Practising daily from day one	Start with three or four days a week and allow rest days.
Ignoring pain	Stop. Sharp pain is information, not a challenge.

12. Questions people ask

Is Ashtanga good for beginners?

It can be, if you learn it slowly with a good teacher and use modifications. Many beginners find a gentler style, such as Hatha, an easier first step.

How often should I practise?

Three to five days a week, with rest days. Traditional teachers suggest a rest day each week and on moon days. Listen to your body.

Is Ashtanga the same as Power yoga?

They are related. Power yoga borrowed the dynamic, strength-building approach but does not require a fixed sequence.

Do I need to chant or follow the philosophy?

You can practise the physical method without chanting. The tradition includes ethical and philosophical teachings, which you may explore at your own pace.

13. A pre-session checklist

- Have I eaten lightly, at least two hours ago, and had some water?
- Is my space clear, warm and free from interruptions?
- Do I know what I will practise, and how long I have?
- Is there anything in my body today (pain, tiredness, illness) that means I should do less?
- Do I know my stop signs: sharp pain, dizziness, breathlessness?

Running through these five questions takes less than a minute and prevents most beginner problems.

14. Your first week, day by day

Day	Suggestion
1	Read this guide. Try just the warm-up and the final rest.
2	Rest, or a five-minute walk.
3	Repeat day 1 and add one new pose or step.
4	Rest.
5	Practise a short version. Notice how you feel afterwards.
6	Write a few lines in the practice log.
7	Rest. Plan next week from what you noticed.

Three short sessions a week are a good start. Regular, gentle practice builds confidence, and rest days let the body adapt.

15. Glossary

Term	Plain meaning
Ashtanga	Eight-limbed.
Primary Series	The first fixed sequence of poses.
Mysore style	Self-paced practice with individual teacher help.
Drishti	A gaze point for focus.
Ujjayi	Soft ocean breath.

Reminder

This guide is general education and not medical advice. It does not diagnose, treat or cure any condition. If you have a health concern, speak with your doctor before starting a new practice.

Practice log

Print this page and keep a short record. Notes help you see patterns over time.

Day	Minutes	Poses done	How it felt	Notes
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				