

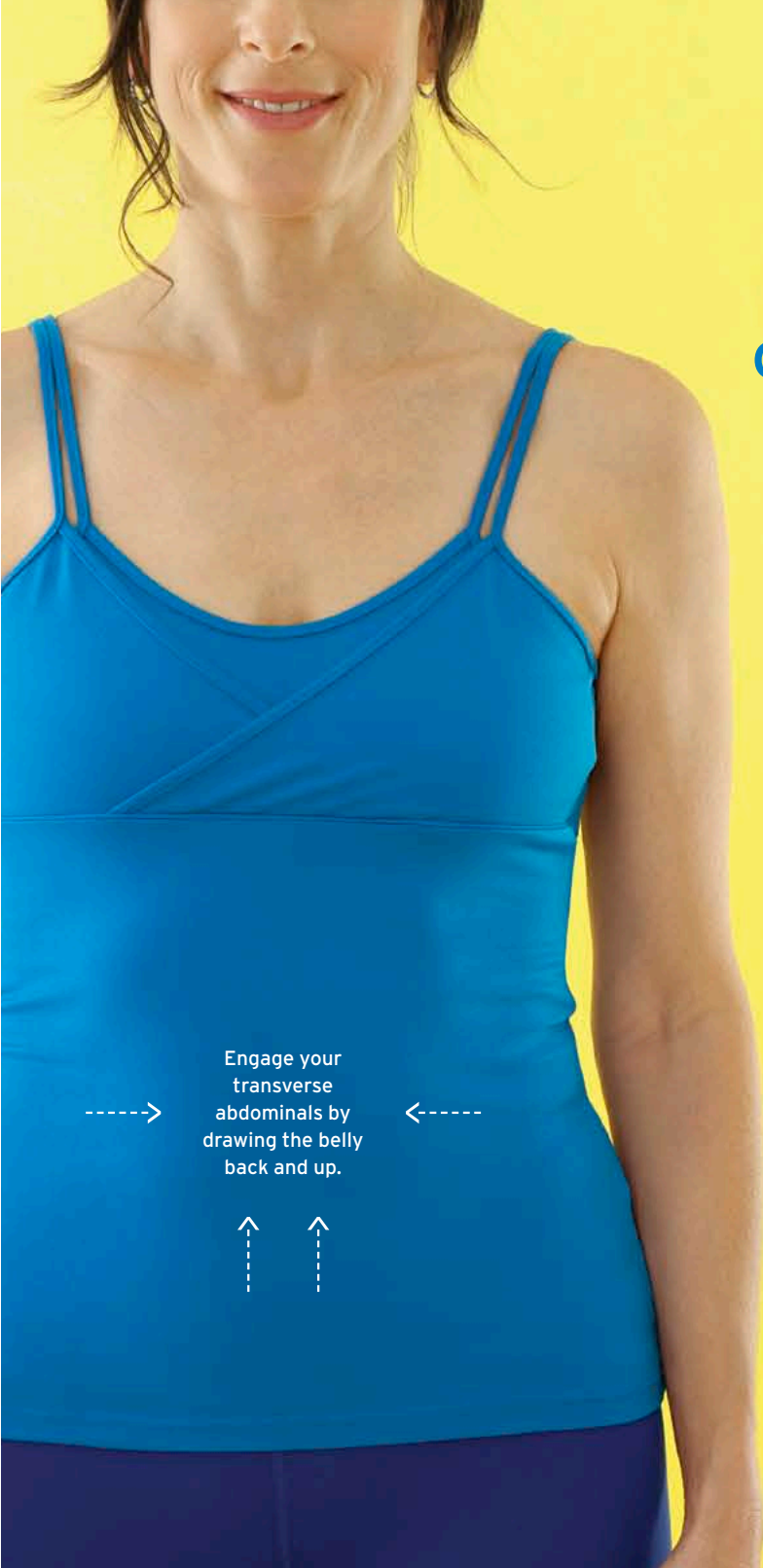
core competency

Fire up your deep core and inner leg muscles to build strong abs.

WHEN YOU SEE yogis doing an arm balance with finesse, they look as light as a feather. They make the pose look so easy that you might forget how much strength it requires. But the inverse is actually true—to make a difficult pose look effortless, you need to be plenty strong.

Yoga doesn't build brute force. It teaches you to cultivate a different type of strength: the strength that results from physical integration and connection. Physical integration is that sense of coordinating different parts of the body so that they work in concert. It's the idea that we become exponentially more powerful when the whole body works in unison rather than when we isolate a muscle or muscle group. When we learn this, and feel it, we have the powerful and beneficial experience of being whole.

A key way to learn physical integration is to work the core abdominal muscles. By simultaneously activating your inner thighs, your deep abdominal muscles, and your breath, you'll build integrated strength that will affect all of your poses.



Engage your transverse abdominals by drawing the belly back and up.

action plan

In these poses, you execute three main actions. You adduct (squeeze together) the inner thighs; engage the transverse abdominus (a deep abdominal muscle that wraps around the torso from front to back and from ribs to pelvis); and contract the hip flexors and the rectus abdominus (a.k.a. your "six pack").

the end game

By simultaneously engaging your inner thighs, hip flexors, and abdominals, you will develop greater core strength, build greater stability, and reinforce a feeling of connection throughout your whole body.

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align + refine

warm-up

These poses can be placed nearly anywhere in a sequence. You can do them before Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) and standing poses to awaken your mid-section and generate heat. You may also put them in the middle of your practice as a lead-up to arm balances, inversions, twists, backbends, or forward bends.

After you finish these poses, take Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining Bound Angle Pose), with your legs supported, as a counterpose. Then rest in Savasana (Corpse Pose). Try taking your heels as wide as your sticky mat to help you release and soften your abdominals and inner thighs.

core integration, with a block



how to This is not a big pose; its small yet deeply challenging action will instantly bring attention to the midline of your body. When you learn to work your inner thighs and your core simultaneously, you can use the action in many of your yoga poses, lending them more strength and stability. To begin, lie back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor hip-width apart. Place a block between your thighs. Position it so that the longest side is parallel to your thigh bones. This will maximize the amount of contact between your inner thighs and the block. Rest your hands on the floor comfortably.

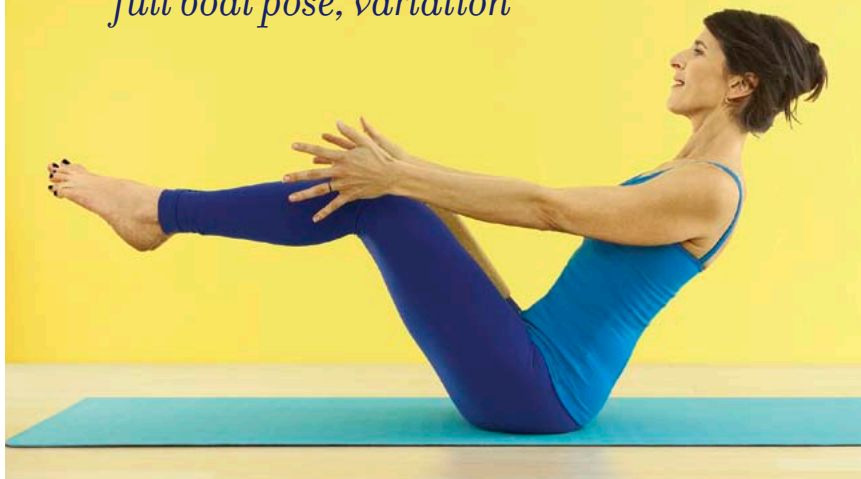
Squeeze the block firmly with your inner thighs and bring your attention to the sensation of your adductors as they engage. Bring your pelvis into a posterior tilt: Draw your hip points up and away from the top of your thighs until your lower back touches the floor lightly. Retain this as you pull your navel toward your spine and feel your abdominals kick in. You'll feel a hollow sensation between your navel and pubic bone.

Finally, add your hip flexors into the equation by lifting your feet an inch or 2 off the mat. Lifting your feet higher is less challenging—if possible, keep your feet hovering just barely above the floor.

As you sustain the pose for 5 to 10 breaths, continue to squeeze the block firmly, pull your hip points up, and float your feet a touch above the floor. Then lower your feet to the floor, relax all effort, and rest for a few breaths before repeating 2 to 3 more times.

why this works It activates the abdominal muscles and hip flexors. Squeezing a block between your legs helps you fire up and strengthen the adductors (inner thighs).

paripurna navasana *full boat pose, variation*



why this works Squeezing the block strengthens your inner thighs, complements the work your hip flexors and abdominals are doing, and focuses your attention on the mid-line of your body.

how to Sit on your sticky mat with your knees bent and toe tips on the floor. Place the block between your thighs with the longest side parallel to your inner thighs. Lengthen your spine: Press your fingertips into the floor behind you, root your sitting bones down, and lift your chest.

Draw your lower belly toward your spine, squeeze the block, and lift your feet up until your shins are parallel to the floor. Feel the strong contraction of your inner thighs, hip flexors, and abdominals as they fire together and pull toward your center.

Now take your fingertips off the ground and reach your arms forward with your palms facing each other. Gently draw the inner borders of your shoulder blades toward your spine to create stability and awareness in your upper back. If your lower back rounds or your chest drops when you lift your fingers away from the floor, simply bring them back to the floor.

Keeping your inner thighs strongly engaged requires constant attention because the intensity in the front of your thighs will tend to preoccupy your mind. Squeeze the block enough that you feel the inner thighs tire at the same rate as your abdominals. After 5 to 6 breaths, remove the block and lower your feet to the floor. Repeat 2 to 3 times.



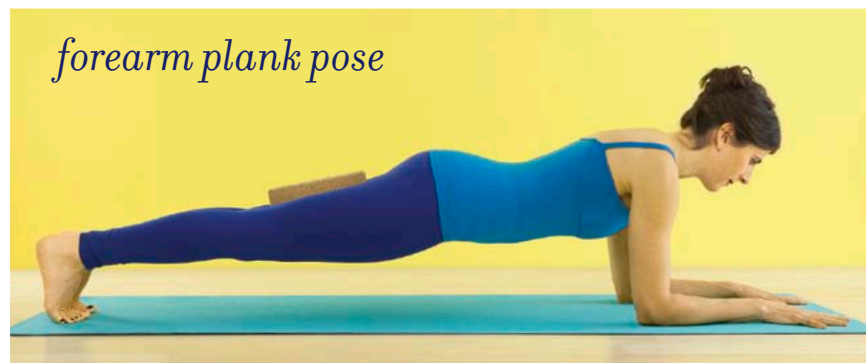
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forearm plank pose

why this works Forearm Plank is more challenging for the abs and hip flexors than Plank Pose because of pure physics. Your upper body is closer to the floor in Forearm Plank, which changes the distribution of your weight and forces you to work harder to support yourself. Squeezing the block between the thighs engages your legs, which helps keep your pelvis and lower back aligned.

how to To prepare for Forearm Plank, come onto all fours. Place a block between your thighs and squeeze it. Bring your elbows to the ground. See that your shoulders are directly above your elbows and your upper arms are vertical. Align your forearms so that they're parallel to each other, with palms facing down.

Lift your knees and straighten your legs. Step your feet back until your legs, pelvis, torso, and head are all in the same horizontal plane. Root firmly into the floor with your forearms, lift the back of the heart, and broaden your shoulder

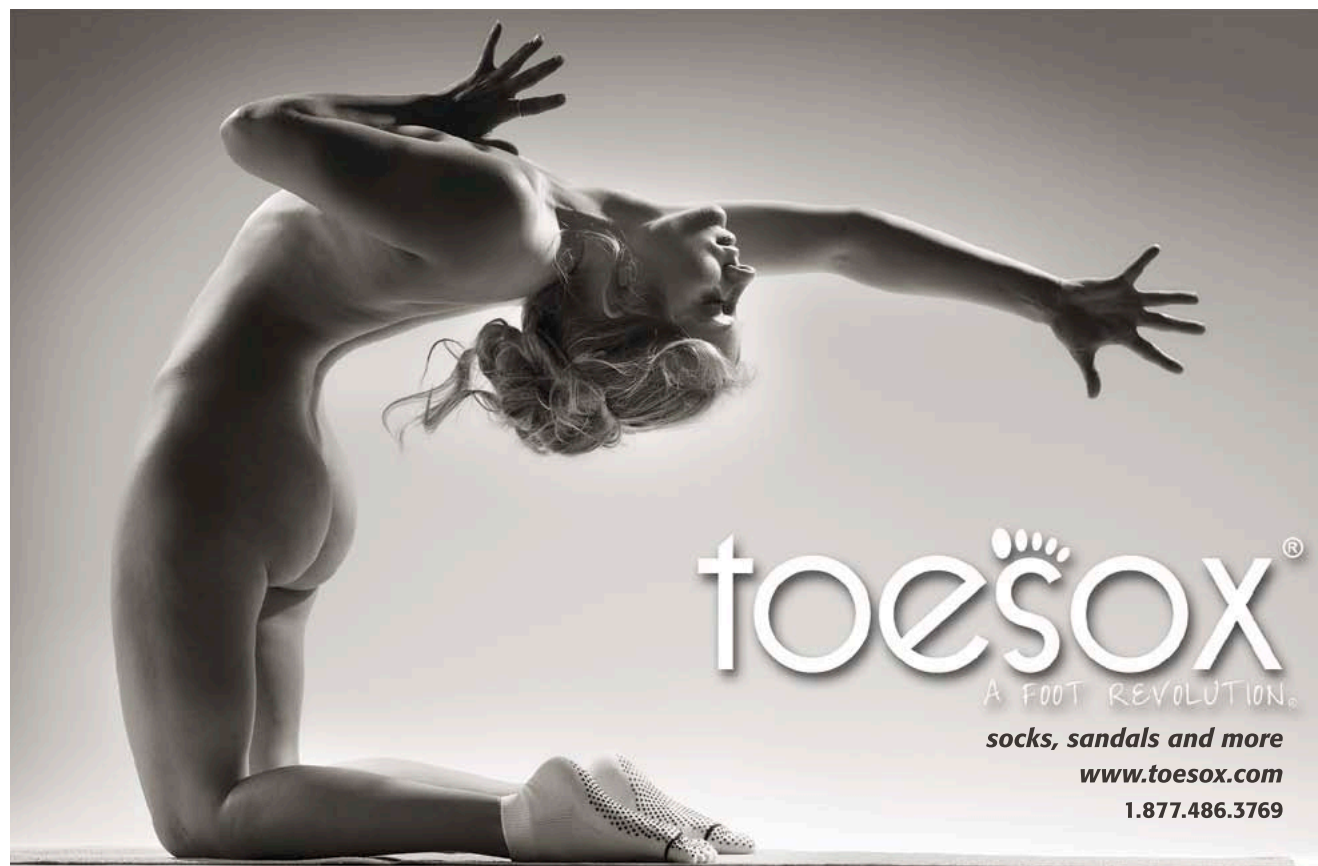
blades. Fire up your core by pulling your hip points toward your navel as you lengthen your tailbone toward your heels, and engage your abdominal muscles. Support these actions by squeezing the block.

It's important to be vigilant and troubleshoot this pose. Notice if you lift your hips too high, roll the front rim of your pelvis toward the floor, or overarch your lower back. (If you can't tell, you can always ask a friend to look at you or snap a quick photo.) Beware of dropping your head lower than your shoulders. All of these "don'ts" crop up as your body's

way of compensating for a lack of core strength. They also prohibit you from getting the full benefit of the pose. To do a pose successfully rather than just survive it, keep your attention on the key actions of the posture.

After 5 to 6 breaths, slowly lower your knees to the floor, remove the block, and rest in Balasana (Child's Pose), savoring a job well done. Repeat 2 to 3 times. ✦

Jason Crandell teaches alignment-based vinyasa yoga workshops and teacher trainings around the world. For more information, visit him at jasonyoga.com.



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Yoga teacher Kathryn Budig photographed by Jasper Johal