




# DEFY GRAVITY

**Whether you're a longtime inversion fan or total newbie, this counterintuitive approach to Handstand will help you learn how to really stick it.**

by Andrea Ferretti  
photography by Allen Birnbach





**Years ago, while on set for a *Yoga Journal* photo shoot,** I watched the cover model, Los Angeles-based vinyasa teacher Alexandria Crow, quietly warm up in the corner, going through standard Sun Salutations and hip openers. Then, unexpectedly, she lifted into Handstand—and held, and held, and held. Crow was casual and fearless as she found that perfectly balanced still point.

I was mesmerized: It was the antithesis of my attempts at freestanding Handstand, which involved an unconscious clenching of my pelvic floor as I braced for the impending Lucille Ball-type pratfall. When I asked how she mastered the pose, she said she'd been doing it most of her life. A former gymnast, Crow remembers practicing Handstand since she was a toddler. The difference between learning it on the gymnastics mat versus the yoga mat? Don't rely on a wall.

Sure, it's a sturdy prop that many yoga teachers use to keep students from falling over when teaching Handstand. But if you become accustomed to having your heels against a wall while you balance, you've taught your mind that this position is vertical when—surprise!—it's not. “The wall is fantastic for learning how to use your legs and upper-body strength to kick all the way up,” says Crow. “But it forever imprints vertical as several degrees beyond the true balance point. And it forces you to use momentum.” A wall can absorb the extra momentum of kicking past vertical; move away from it, and kicking too hard will topple you over.

Gymnasts, on the other hand, understand where true vertical is from their first attempt at Handstand. That's because they learn the pose in the middle of a room, where they slowly press their legs overhead without momentum and with the help of a spotter, while cultivating control of their core, shoulders, and thighs—the same control we strive for in asana practice.

If you've already imprinted vertical incorrectly (and if you never were a gymnast, chances are that you have), all is not lost. Crow has created a *Yoga Journal* exclusive series of poses that combine her gymnastics and yoga experience to help train your body and mind to relearn true vertical alignment and strengthen body parts essential to freestanding Handstand. Do the poses often, and focus on building strength and the fine motor skills required to balance on your hands, rather than on nailing the inversion.

“Think of babies learning to balance on their feet,” says Crow. “They're wobbly, and they do it all day, every day. It's not going to happen overnight, but once you learn where vertical is, it's like riding a bike: The muscle memory never goes away.” In the process, you'll feel more strong and confident—or as I think of it: less Lucille Ball, more Alexandria Crow.

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## 7 STEPS TO MASTER HANDSTAND

SEQUENCE DEVELOPED AND MODELED BY  
ALEXANDRIA CROW

Inversions are challenging and, yes, a little scary, but this sequence can help you learn freestanding Handstand (Adho Mukha Vrksasana)—as in, no wall, in the middle of a room—as your practice progresses. Work with a partner who can spot whether your ankles, hips, and hands aren't aligned—common form mistakes that topple Handstand. (Leave hands-on adjustments to an experienced teacher.) To ensure you have enough strength to work toward Handstand, first be sure you can hold Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) or Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) for about 5 minutes.

**GET READY** Take Balasana (Child's Pose), fingers pointed ahead. Lift your elbows, press your palms down, and engage your arms. Spend 10 breaths here. Lift to Down Dog for 10 breaths, walk your hands to your feet, and hang in bent-knee Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) for 10 breaths, holding your elbows with opposite hands over your head. Bring your hands to hips, and inhale to standing for 3 rounds of Sun Salutation A.

**REMEMBER** Alignment and precision come when you're not too fatigued, but strength is built on the edge of fatigue. Walk the line between the two cautiously in this sequence.

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### 1 Standing L Shape >

Stand about one-leg's distance from a wall, aligned in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Lift your right leg to hip height and straighten to place your foot flat on the wall, directly ahead of your right hip, so that the leg is parallel to the ground. Keep your foot vertical. Make sure your standing leg is directly under your left hip. You want to create a right angle between your femur bones. Reach your arms up alongside your ears, keeping them shoulder-distance apart. Finally, flex your wrists so that your palms face the ceiling as if you were doing Handstand. After 5 breaths, repeat with the left leg raised.

MODEL: ALEXANDRIA CROW; STYLIST: EMILY CHOI; HAIR/MAKEUP: SALLY WALKER MINA; TOP: MPG; LEGGINGS: ALTERNATIVE; LOCATION: 10355TH.COM



**TIP** If the foot of your raised leg is higher than your hip when your standing foot is directly under its corresponding hip, move farther from the wall.

## ◀ 2 Half Handstand

**a** Both feet on wall. Stand with your back against the wall, and place your fingertips where the edges of your heels were in Standing L, coming to a short version of Down Dog. One leg at a time, place your feet on the wall at hip height, coming to an inverted L shape. Bring your feet together and press your legs straight, kneecaps pointing toward the ground. Arms next to your ears, press evenly through your hands and roll your outer arms toward the wall. Reach your sitting bones straight toward the ceiling. After 10 breaths, come down and rest in Uttanasana.

**b** One leg lifted. Return to Half Handstand. Lift your left leg ceiling-ward, leading with your inner thigh, so that your pelvis stays level. Stop when it feels like your left side is stacked in a vertical line from your hand to your foot. Reach through the ball of your raised foot. After 5 breaths, lower the leg and repeat on the right side. Rest in Uttanasana.

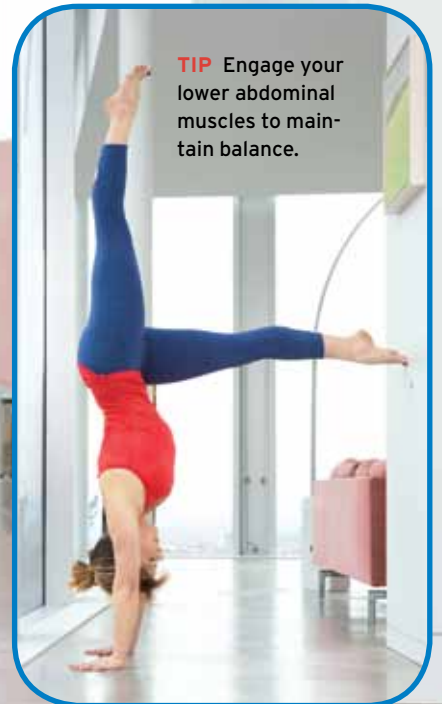
**TIP** Once you lift your leg, commit to memory how your shoulders feel in relation to your hands; this pose gives you a sense for true vertical alignment.



## 3 Half Handstand toe at the wall ▶

From Uttanasana come to Down Dog. Move your hands a few inches farther from the wall, and return to Half Handstand, with your left leg lifted. Press the ball of your right foot into the wall, shifting the point of contact to your big toe, so that the heel lifts free. Take 5 breaths, lower the leg, and repeat on the other side.

**TIP** Engage your lower abdominal muscles to maintain balance.

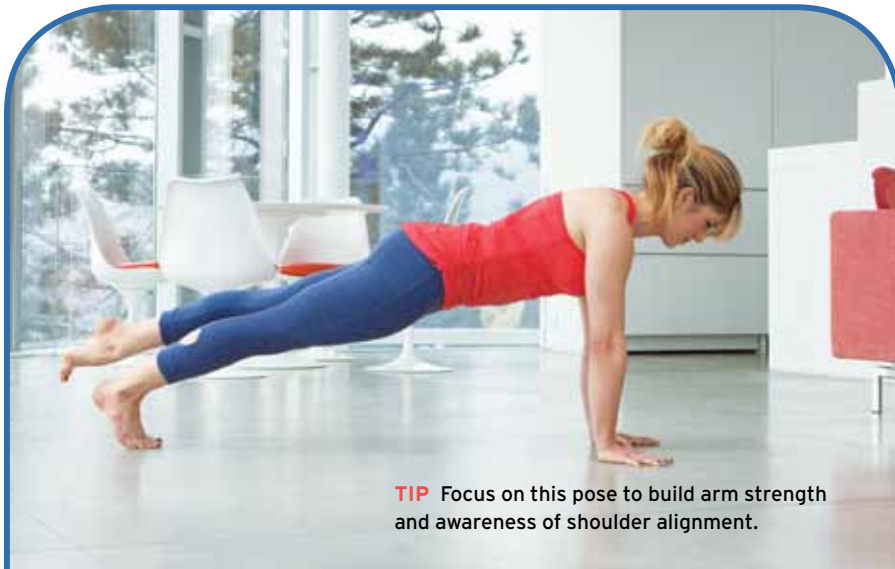




## ◀ 4 Three-Legged Downward Dog

From Down Dog, lift your left leg as high as your hip, leading with your inner thigh so that your heel stays in line with your second toe. Continue to lift your leg, creating a straight line from your left hand to your left foot, which will alert you to the alignment Handstand requires. After 5 breaths, lower your leg and repeat on the other side.

**TIP** Don't rotate your raised leg, and keep your hips square; if your leg turns in or out, it causes your pelvis to shift, making balancing in Handstand impossible.



**TIP** Focus on this pose to build arm strength and awareness of shoulder alignment.

## ^ 5 Plank with leg lifts

From Three-Legged Downward Dog, come to Downward Dog, and shift to Plank Pose, making sure your hands are under your shoulders. Lift your left foot 3 or 4 inches off the ground, leading with your inner thigh and reaching your toes and the ball of the foot back. Your body's left side is in the shape of Handstand, from torso to foot. Stay for 5 breaths. Maintaining the alignment in your left side, press back to Three-Legged Downward Dog, and then bring your foot down. From Downward Dog, shift forward to Plank and repeat on the right side.

### OUR EXPERT

Alexandria Crow leads public classes, workshops, and teacher trainings in Santa Monica, California, and around the world. Visit [alexandriacrow.com](http://alexandriacrow.com) for her schedule and online classes.

### STUDY WITH CROW

She teaches a workshop on arm balances called *Practice Makes Progress during Yoga Journal LIVE! San Diego in July*. Learn more at [yjevents.com/sd](http://yjevents.com/sd).

## 6 Handstand Hop-Ups ▼

Now you can put your training into action—let the fun begin!

**a Get prepped.** Take Down Dog, and then shorten your stance to about one-third the distance you normally have between hands and feet. Shift your shoulders 2 inches past your wrists (this will position your upper body correctly when you kick up). Lift your favored leg as high as possible, leading with your inner thigh to keep your pelvis square with your shoulders.

**b Hop up.** Bend the leg that's down, and push off the ground with the ball of the foot, using that leg as a spring to lift both legs overhead. You're aiming to get your pelvis over your shoulders and bring your straight leg toward vertical. Keep the springing leg bent and close to your belly. Try at least 5 times.

**TIP** You might be tempted, but don't kick at all with your leading leg.

a



b





## 7 Handstand >

With practice, you'll begin to hover in Handstand Hop-Ups, one leg straight, the other bent. When that happens, you can slowly straighten the bent knee while aiming the ball of the foot for the ceiling. Take your time; the bent knee is a counterbalance that prevents you from kicking past vertical. As your strength builds over time, you will be able to use less springing to lift your legs. ❖

**TIP** Gently shift your weight between your finger pads and the heels of your hands to hone your balance.