

Fab Abs

Strengthen your core and improve your posture.
By Richard Rosen

Though it sounds impressive in Sanskrit, Urdhva Prasarita Padasana rendered in English becomes the decidedly clunky “Raised Stretched-Out Foot Pose.” The name is much ado about a fairly simple exercise that has deep benefits, but most teachers just call it by its initials.

UPP involves nothing more than lying on your back and swinging your extended legs through a slightly less than 90-degree arc, from perpendicular to the floor to nearly—but not quite—parallel, and back again. This simple movement strengthens a muscle that passes through the very core of your body, which aids your posture, your movement, and even (because this muscle is in close proximity to the back of the diaphragm) the way you breathe. In *Light on Yoga* B.K.S. Iyengar says UPP is “wonderful for reducing fat round the abdomen, strengthens the lumbar region of the back, and tones the abdominal organs.”



The pose has a well-deserved reputation as an abdominal strengthener, but we aren’t talking about the rectus abdominus, the long, flat muscle that shores up the belly between the pubis and ribs, which bodybuilder types, like California’s governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, transform into cosmetically flashy six-pack abs. But UPP’s real benefit is to a pair of deeper abdominal muscles, the psoas, which Ida Rolf, the originator of Structural Integration (popularly known as Rolfing), deemed “one of the most significant muscles of the body.”

Each psoas lies just behind the abdominal organs and is more difficult to access than the rectus abdominus. It runs a circuitous route: It attaches on the front of the lumbar spine (lower back), then runs along the inner surface of the pelvis and over the pubis to attach to the inner surface of the thigh bone (femur), at a bony knob called the lesser trochanter. Rolf says that the psoas, outwardly a powerful hip flexor, plays an important role in general body structure, in posture and movement, and even in digestion and elimination.

Puppet Practice

The root of UPP’s movement is deep inside the torso where the psoas attaches to the lumbar spine. I find it useful to imagine that the psoas is a puppet string, originating on my inner thigh (lesser trochanter). The puppeteer (what good are puppet strings without a puppeteer?) is sitting on my lumbar spine and holding the other end. She can pull on or release it, depending on whether she’s raising or lowering my leg.

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor with your heels about a foot away from your buttocks. Focus on your right lesser trochanter. From here, in your imagination, follow the course of your puppet-string psoas through the pelvis and up to the lumbar spine, where your puppeteer is holding its free end.

As she pulls on the string, exhale and watch your right foot lift effortlessly off the floor and your right thigh close in toward your belly. (For now, keep your knee bent.) Pause when the hip is fully flexed, and inhale. As the puppeteer releases the string, exhale and lightly float your foot back toward the floor. But wait! Just as your tippy-toes brush the floor, pause to inhale. On the exhalation, the puppeteer will pull again, and your foot will rise up. Continue this up-and-down swinging for at least a minute. Pause at the conclusion of each movement to inhale; lift or drop your foot only on an exhalation. When finished, return your right foot to the floor and repeat with your left leg.



When each leg has worked solo, try the exercise with your legs together. Be prepared for a bit more challenge, especially if your psoas pair is weak, as it likely is. You can expect two things to happen as you swing your legs: One, you'll unconsciously assist the psoas by tightening your rectus abdominus; and two, your low back will arch away from the floor. Neither action is desirable. Tightening the abdominal muscle interferes with breathing, overworks your six pack, and also prevents the psoas from assuming its proper role in hip flexion; arching is an invitation to an oh-my-aching-back injury. What to do?

Still laying supine on the floor, rest your fingertips on your lower belly (below your navel) and have your puppeteer lift your feet off the floor. Set your knees over your hip joints (so your thighs are perpendicular to the floor and your heels hang down by your buttocks) and hold this position for a minute or so. Your belly should be firm (neither rock hard nor squishy) and relatively flat (not mounded up), your lumbar spine in its natural, gentle arch.

Slowly lower and raise your bent legs. Your puppeteer may pull with more effort than before. As she goes about her business, mind your lower belly and back. Keep the surface of your belly relatively soft and maintain the natural arch in your lower back. Try not to disturb them with your leg movements. If you feel strain in your low back, protect it by swinging your legs only a few inches through the arc. Continue for a minute or so, then, on an exhalation, release your feet to the floor and rest for a minute.

All Together Now

Now try the full pose, with both legs. You can practice UPP with or without support. If the previous exercise was difficult, use the support of a wall. Lie on your back with your buttocks about 12 to 18 inches from the wall. Exhale, lift your feet, and bring your knees over your hips. Inhale and straighten your knees so your legs are perpendicular to the floor. Separate your feet about 12 inches, inwardly rotate your thighs (so that your big toes are closer to each other than the heels are), press through the backs of your heels, then squeeze your legs together. Exhale and lower your legs until your heels touch the wall. Inhale, then exhale as you bring your legs back to perpendicular.

Take a moment to assess how close to the wall you need to be. Edge back until you find a spot that feels like a challenge but not a strain. Measure your preferred distance from the wall so you know where to plunk yourself down the next time you practice UPP. Four to six repetitions is a reasonable start, and 12 to 15 repetitions a worthwhile goal. Over time, gradually back away from the wall until that wonderful day when you can go into the pose without any support.

The second approach to UPP is to do it unsupported, which I suspect a lot of enthusiastic male readers will attempt even though they shouldn't. Lower your legs until your abdominals and back start to howl, at which point you should immediately swing your legs back to vertical (bending your knees if needed); or until your heels are 3 or 4 inches away from the floor, at which point you should exhale smoothly and bring your legs back to vertical. Maintain the inner rotation of your thighs and the active push through the backs of your heels.

Gradually build toward a dozen or more repetitions. You're ready to increase the number when your jaw, tongue, eyes, and back of your neck are relaxed in the pose. When you can swing your legs through a full arc smoothly without locking or gripping the psoas, or holding your breath, you can add more.

It's easier to do this exercise if you press your palms and arms down against the floor alongside your torso. For a greater challenge, reach your arms overhead along the floor, with your palms facing up. You can also weigh your hands and wrists down with a sandbag.



UPP is great for strengthening the psoas, improving posture, and firming belly bulges. It also teaches you to “root” your legs energetically. When your movements are initiated from the spine, you’ll feel more stable. And you’ll find that UPP is great preparation as you take on more exciting yoga challenges.

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