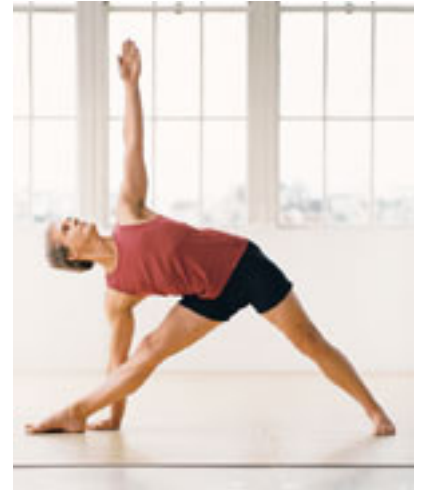


Love Triangle ~By Julie Gudmestad

Tips to keep Trikonasana from being a pain in the neck.

Although Trikonasana (Triangle Pose) is considered a beginning standing pose, it offers a lifetime's worth of lessons. And positioning the head and neck is certainly high on many students' list of challenges.

When you're in Triangle, you may find that your neck feels overly tense or compressed. Or you may find that it's nearly impossible to turn your head to look up at your top hand. Usually these problems can be resolved by fine-tuning the position of your head, neck, and shoulders to bring them into optimal alignment. (If you have preexisting neck injuries or arthritis, though, you may need to make further modifications with the guidance of an experienced teacher, or consult a health care practitioner.)



But first, let's dispel the notion that your neck should feel relaxed in Trikonasana. Your head, after all, weighs around 12 pounds. With your spine parallel to the floor, the muscles on the top side of your neck have to contract to hold that weight in place against gravity. Ultimately, Trikonasana will strengthen these muscles, including the upper trapezius and levator scapula (which extend from the base of the skull and back of the neck down to the upper scapula) and sternocleidomastoid (from the top of the breastbone and inner collarbones to just behind the ears). But since a working, contracting muscle feels tight and tense, strengthening it may be uncomfortable. This is especially true if you came to Trikonasana with weak side-neck muscles—which is likely, since few of us spend time holding our heads sideways outside of yoga practice.

You can give these muscles a head start in the strengthening process with a simple isometric exercise. Place your palm on the side of your head, just above your ear, fingers pointing up. Press your hand against your head and your head into your hand with equal force, so the side muscles contract but your head doesn't move. Hold for 20 to 30 seconds. Do this a few times each day to prepare these muscles for Triangle.

As you develop better alignment in the pose and gradually increase your endurance, your muscles will get stronger and be able to do their job without complaining. While strength in the side-neck muscles doesn't have a lot of benefit for daily activities, it does help with sideways poses such as Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose) and Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose). What's more, strengthening these muscles will help stabilize your neck in Sirsasana (Headstand). *continued on next page.....*



Align With Your Midline

Although the side-neck muscles have to work in Trikonasana, you can reduce the strain if you keep your neck in line with the rest of the spine and don't try to look up at the ceiling right away. With your head in this position, you can use a couple of simple techniques to check your alignment—first in the left-right orientation, and then in the front-back plane.

Set up to do Trikonasana to the right, so that you can see your head and torso in a mirror. Once you're in the pose, look straight ahead and draw an imaginary line from your navel up through your breastbone. Even better, use a spotter with a good eye or a helper with a long dowel or broomstick to help you see the line. Ideally, the line should continue from the center of your torso to your nose, through the center of your face. If your head hangs below the line, your neck will be sidebending to the right. If your head is lifted above it, your neck will be sidebending to the left. Either way can strain your neck. After correcting your position by centering your head on the line, imagine that you're lengthening your spine away from the pelvis, all the way up through the crown of your head, which should help decompress your neck. The left and right sides of your neck should be just about even in length.

The second dimension of aligning the neck with the rest of the spine involves the front-back orientation. Many people tend to keep their heads forward in their everyday posture, so "forward head" is a common problem in Trikonasana. This misalignment is easy to correct by doing the pose with your back to a wall. For Trikonasana to the right, set up with your right buttock lightly touching the wall, and your right foot and left heel near it. Come over into the pose. Ideally, your torso and head should be in the same plane as your legs, and that plane will be parallel to the wall. With your right buttock touching the wall, your shoulders, head, and left hand should be within a few inches of it. If your head is several inches away, correct the position by bringing the back of your head closer, though not necessarily touching the wall. Make sure you haven't overarched your lower back; check that your back ribs and shoulders are also near the wall.

Now that your head and neck are aligned with the rest of your spine, let's make sure the curve of your neck is optimal before you turn your head. You can learn to feel the proper curve while you're upright, and then find it again while sideways in the pose. Sitting or standing, place the palm side of three fingers across the back of your neck, just below the base of your skull. Drop your chin toward your chest, and you should feel the back of the neck flatten and the nuchal ligament (a large, very firm ligament that's right in the center of the back of the neck) rise up under your fingers. If you lift the chin back up and keep going until you're looking at the ceiling, your neck will be hyperextending and you'll feel the base of your skull compressing into your neck. The position you want, both for Trikonasana and everyday activities, is a soft curve forward, neither flat nor hyperextended. In the upright position, your chin and gaze should be level. (You may have to confirm that in a mirror.) *continued on next page.....*



Check Your Curve

To put the correct neck curve into Trikonasana, come back to your wall setup and tip your pelvis to the right to come into the pose. Lengthen your spine from your lower back out through the crown of the head, so your neck decompresses along the midline of your torso. Check that the back of your rib cage and the backs of your shoulders are near the wall. As you also bring the back of your head toward the wall, make sure that you don't stick your chin out (thus hyperextending your neck) or tuck your chin into your chest (flattening the neck). Check the curve with your left hand.

Now you're finally ready to turn your head to look up at the top hand. Just remember that if your head is forward or your neck is sidebending, flat, or hyperextended, your neck rotation will be limited or even painful. You may want to ask for feedback from your teacher or an experienced friend to make sure that as you turn your head, you don't stick your chin out, bring your chin too close to your chest, or tip your head up.

Practice Right Rotation

If your navel and breastbone are turned toward the floor in the pose, your neck will have to overwork as you turn your eyes to look at the ceiling. You may want to move your Trikonasana back to the wall and work on rotating your torso by moving your left waist, ribs, and shoulder closer to the wall. With your front body facing straight ahead, turning your face and your gaze upward will just be the icing on the cake.

Finally, a word about how the shoulder blades can contribute to neck discomfort in Trikonasana. If your everyday posture includes tight neck muscles holding your shoulder blades halfway up to your ears (which often accompanies a forward head), it's likely that you'll bring that tension into the pose.

Stand again in front of a mirror, lift your breastbone up off your heart, and ease those shoulder blades down your back. That's the same action you'll need in Trikonasana, and it's handled by the lower trapezius muscles in your midback. In the pose—and in daily life—increase the distance between your ears and your shoulders on both the left and right sides, like a turtle sticking its head out of its shell. Visualize having a beautiful long neck, smooth neck muscles, and full freedom to turn your head in both directions. Then practice it, and it can be yours.

Julie Gudmestad is a physical therapist and Iyengar Yoga teacher in Portland, Oregon.

