



Back Lift

The Back Lift is typically the second exercise taught to each student. The exercise works with the muscles of the back, shoulders, and buttocks. The Back Lift involves lying on the stomach, lifting up the head, one arm and the opposite leg, and slowly lowering back down. It should be taught as four separate movements and then put together into the full Back Lift exercise.

EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

Starting Position: Lie on your stomach with your head turned to the right. Stretch your left arm down by your side. Have your right arm bent, elbow pointing straight out to the side, and your right palm resting on the floor near your head.

First Movement: Slowly lift your right elbow off the floor, leaving your palm on the floor. Notice the gentle contraction in your upper trapezius muscle (between your shoulder and neck). Only lift up as high as is comfortable for you. When you're ready, lower your elbow down as slowly as you can, using all your mental focus.

Second Movement: Inhale down into your lower belly, and at the same time gently lift your head off the floor, keeping it turned to the right. Only lift as high as is comfortable. Feel the gentle contraction of your lower back muscles. When you're ready, lower down and release your lower back as slowly and with as much control as you can.

Third Movement: Slide your right hand under your left cheek or temple, so that your left cheek or temple is resting on the back of your right hand. Inhale down into your lower belly, and at the same time lift up your head, hand and right arm all at the same time. Feel the contraction of muscles from your right shoulder down to your lower back. When you're ready, lower down and release these muscles as slowly and with as much control as you can.

Fourth Movement: Slide your right hand out from under your head if you wish. Slowly lift up your left leg, leaving your knee straight. Feel the contraction of your gluteal and lower back muscles. When you're ready, lower down and release these muscles as slowly and with as much control as you can.

Full Exercise: Slide your right hand under your left cheek or temple, so that your left cheek or temple is resting on the back of your right hand. Inhale down into your lower belly, and lift your head, hand, and right arm while simultaneously lifting your left leg. Feel the muscles in your right shoulder, your entire back, and left buttocks working to help you lift up. When you're ready, exhale and release down as slowly and as smoothly as you possibly can.

When you're done, practice this movement sequence on the other side, with your head turned to the left.

ANATOMY OF THE BACK LIFT

First Movement: This movement works mainly with the upper trapezius. The student should feel the gentle contraction of this muscle as they lift up their elbow.

Second Movement: Students should feel the extensor muscles in their lower back contracting to help them lift up their head. They may also feel a contraction on the side of their neck (the side that their head is turned toward).

Third Movement: Lifting up the head and arm at the same time engages the trapezius muscle and all of the extensor muscles of the back. Students should feel the lower back working the most, as it should be doing most of the work.

Fourth Movement: Students should feel the lower back and gluteal muscles contracting to help them lift up their leg. They may also feel the hamstrings gently contracting in the leg that is lifting up.

Full Exercise: The full Back Lift engages the trapezius, extensor muscles of the back, and gluteal muscles. Practicing the exercise in parts allows the student to start sensing and gaining control of these muscles, and allows them to get more benefit from the full exercise. The Back Lift works with the natural contralateral mechanics of walking, in which we move the right leg forward with the left side of the upper body, and vice versa.

Breathing in the Back Lift: Students should be instructed to inhale down into their lower belly when doing the Second Movement, Third Movement, and full Back Lift. These movements involve an arching of the back, and arching the back is a natural extension of inhaling. Inhaling while lifting up into these movements will enhance the movement and allow them to do the movement more fully. Exhaling while lifting up into these movements would restrict the range of motion. After inhaling and lifting up, you can instruct the student to breathe as needed. They should never hold their breath.

CONDITIONS HELPED BY THE BACK LIFT

The Back Lift directly addresses the following conditions by releasing involuntary muscle contraction in the back, shoulders, and buttocks, and alleviating compression of the vertebrae.

Back tightness and pain
Shoulder tightness and pain
Neck tightness and pain
Headaches
Disc problems
Sciatica & piriformis syndrome
Hyperlordosis
Scoliosis

HOW TO TEACH THE BACK LIFT

Get the student in their starting position. If the student is standing up, tell them to gently come down to the floor and lie down on their stomach. If they are lying down on their back, instruct them to slowly and lazily roll over onto their stomach. The student should turn their head to the right and bend their right arm so that their elbow is pointing straight out to the side. Their right hand should be resting on the floor near their head, palm down and fingers relaxed. They should stretch their left arm down by their side, with their shoulder relaxed and the back of their left hand resting on the floor. *Note: If it is painful or uncomfortable for the student to have their head turned to the side, they may practice this entire exercise with their head straight, facing down at the floor, with their forehead on the floor and back of the neck long.

Invite the student to close their eyes. Closing their eyes removes all the visual information that their brain would otherwise have to process. Keeping the eyes closed allows the student to focus completely on their internal sensations.

First Movement: Instruct the student to slowly lift their right elbow off the floor, leaving their right hand relaxed on the floor. Ask them to notice the gentle contraction in their upper trapezius muscle as they lift up. If the student cannot feel the contraction of this muscle as they lift up their elbow, you can gently tap the muscle as they lift up to bring their sensory awareness to it. They only need to lift their elbow as high as is comfortable for them. When they have lifted up as high as they want to, instruct them to lower their elbow down as slowly and with as much control as they possibly can. When their elbow has reached the floor, they should completely relax. The student can repeat this movement several times, and they will likely feel increased sensation, fuller range of motion, and greater control each time.

Second Movement: Instruct the student to inhale down into their lower belly, and at the same time gently lift their head off the floor, keeping it turned to the right. If it is painful or uncomfortable for them to have their head turned to the side, they can keep it straight (starting with their forehead on the floor). They should only lift their head as high as is comfortable. The student should feel a gentle contraction of their lower back muscles. The student should lower down as slowly and with as much control as possible, focusing on the slow release of the lower back muscles. When their head has reached the floor, they should completely relax. The student can repeat this movement one more time if they wish.

Third Movement: Instruct the student to slide their right hand under their left cheek or temple, so that their left cheek or temple is resting on the back of their right hand. Ask them to inhale down into their lower belly, and at the same time lift up their head, hand and right arm all at the same time. The student should feel the contraction of muscles from their right shoulder down to their lower back. When the student is ready, they can lower down and release these muscles as slowly and with as much control as they can. When they have reached the floor, they should completely relax. The student can repeat this movement one more time if they wish.

Fourth Movement: The student may slide their right hand out from under their head if they wish. Instruct the student to slowly lift up their left leg, leaving their knee straight. The student should feel the contraction of their gluteal and lower back muscles. They can rest their left hand on their lower back or buttocks to help them feel the contraction if they wish. When the student is ready, they can lower their leg down and release the lower back and gluteal muscles slowly and with as much control as they can. When their leg has reached the floor, they should completely relax. The student can repeat this movement one or two more times if they wish.

Full Exercise: The student should slide their right hand under their left cheek or temple, so that their left cheek or temple is resting on the back of their right hand. Instruct the student to inhale down into their lower belly, and at the same time lift their head, hand, and right arm while simultaneously lifting their left leg. They should feel the muscles in their right shoulder, their entire back, and left buttocks working to help them lift up. When the student is ready, they can release down as slowly and with as much control as they can. They should try to release their upper body and leg down at the same rate. When they have reached the floor, they should completely relax. The student can repeat this movement one or two more times if they wish.

Turning to the left side: Instruct the student to first bend their left arm and rest their left hand on the floor by their head. Then they can gently press their hands into the floor to help them lift up their head. They should turn their head to the left very gently, as their neck may be stiff from being turned to the right side. After they have turned their head to the left, they can stretch their right arm down by their side.

Modification:

If the student feels neck pain when their head is turned to either side, the student can do this entire exercise with their head straight, facing down at the floor. Their forehead should be on the floor so that the back of their neck stays long.

Notes:

Students should be encouraged to practice each movement separately before doing the full Back Lift. Practicing the movement in parts allows the student to start sensing and gaining control of all of the muscles involved in the movement, and allows them to get more benefit from the full exercise.

When the student has the hang of the Back Lift, you can introduce a gentle rotational component to the movement. Instead of thinking of lifting the head, arm and leg straight upward, the student can imagine bringing their working shoulder diagonally toward their working hip. They can turn their head to look over their shoulder, and open up their chest even more. Ask your student to notice how this feels different than simply lifting straight upward.

If the student is not releasing slowly enough, encourage them to count. Counting as they slowly release down is an effective way to pace themselves and get the most benefit from the movements by going as slowly as possible. Students can count to eight, ten, twelve or longer (whatever feels like a challenge to them) as they release each of the movements.

Students should release all of their muscles completely each time they finish a movement. If you do not instruct them to do this, some students will hold on to some muscle tension in between each repetition as a way to stay prepared for the next movement. Keep reminding your student to release everything completely each time they lower down, and to rest for a few seconds in between each movement.

The following is an example of how I teach the Back Lift:

If the student is standing: Gently come down to the floor, and lie down on your stomach.

If the student is lying on their back: Slowly and lazily roll over onto your stomach.

Turn your head to the right, and stretch your left arm down by your side. Bend your right elbow and rest your right hand on the floor near your head, palm on the floor and fingers relaxed. Your right elbow should be extending straight out to the side away from your body.

I'm going to teach you a movement called the Back Lift. I'll teach it to you in a few smaller movements, and then we'll put it together.

First, leave your right hand on the floor, and slowly lift your right elbow off the floor – only as high as you want to. You don't have to lift it very high. Now, very slowly lower your elbow down to the floor. When your elbow has reached the floor, completely relax. Let's do this movement two more times. Go ahead and slowly lift up your elbow again, and this time notice what muscles you feel contracting. When you've lifted up as high as you want to, lower your elbow down as slowly and with as much control as you possibly can. When your elbow has reached the floor, completely relax.

One last time, slowly lift up your elbow, and notice what muscles you feel contracting. This movement mainly uses your upper trapezius muscle, which is where a lot of people tend to hold tension in their shoulders. Feel that area between your right shoulder and your neck contract – you can hold your elbow up for a moment to really get a sense of what's contracting – then release it as slowly as you possibly can to let your elbow come down. Make sure you're not actively pulling your elbow down toward the floor. Imagine that you're resisting gravity as you lower your elbow down. The slower you release, the more benefit you'll get from this movement. When your elbow has reached the floor, completely relax.

Now you'll do a movement with just your head. Inhale into your lower belly, so that you're gently pressing your lower belly down into the floor, and at the same time lift your head off the floor as if you want to look over your right shoulder. You don't have to lift up very high – just as high as is comfortable for you. Then release as slowly and with as much control as you can to lower your head down.

If you want to, you can bring your left hand to your lower back to feel the muscles contracting and releasing as you lift up and lower down. Inhale down into your lower belly and gently press your belly down into the floor as you lift up your head. See if you can feel the muscles in your lower back contracting. Then, release them as slowly as you can to let your head lower down.

Now you're going to put the movement of your head and your arm together. Leave your right palm face down on the floor, and slide your right hand under your left cheek or your left temple. Now you're resting your left cheek or temple on the back of your right hand. Pretend your head is glued to your hand. When you're ready, inhale into your lower belly and lift up your head, hand and right arm all at the same time. Only lift as high as is comfortable for you. When you're ready, slowly release and lower down to the floor, as slowly as you possibly can. When you get to the floor, completely relax.

Do this movement one more time. If you want to, you can bring your left hand to your lower back to feel the muscles that are working. When you're ready, inhale into your lower belly and lift up your head, hand and right arm all at the same time. As you lift up, notice what muscles you feel contracting – in your right shoulder and all the way down your back. When you're ready, release these muscles as slowly as you can to come back down to the floor. When you get to the floor, completely relax.

Now you'll be doing a movement with just your leg, so if you want to slide your right hand out from under your head you can.

So, you've been working with your right arm, but now you're going to work with your left leg. When you're ready, very slowly lift your left leg off the floor. You don't have to lift it very high. Keep your knee straight, but relaxed – you don't have to lock your knee. When you're ready, lower your leg down as slowly as you can. When your leg reaches the floor, completely relax.

You can do this two more times. If you want to, you can bring your left hand to your lower back or your left buttocks to help you feel what's contracting as you lift up your leg. Slowly lift your left leg off the floor. Feel your lower back and gluteal muscles contracting, then very slowly release them to let your leg come back down to the floor. When your leg reaches the floor, completely relax.

Repeat this one more time. Slowly lift your left leg off the floor. Feel your lower back and gluteal muscles contracting, then release them as slowly as you can to let your leg come back down to the floor. Stay controlled on the way down – resist gravity and release as slowly as you can. When your leg reaches the floor, completely relax.

When you're ready, you're going to put all these movements together, so you'll be doing the full Back Lift. Slide your right hand under your head again, so that your left cheek or temple is resting on the back of your right hand.

When you're ready, inhale into your lower belly and lift up your head, hand, right arm and left leg all at the same time. Then release and lower down to the floor as slowly as you possibly can. When you reach the floor, relax completely for a few seconds.

You can do this one more time. Inhale down into your belly and let your belly press down into the floor as you lift up your head, hand, arm, and leg. Then release and lower down as slowly as you possibly can. Resist gravity as you lower down. You should be releasing slowly enough that it is taking all your mental focus. When you reach the floor, completely relax.

When you're ready, bend your left arm and rest your left palm on the floor near your head. Gently press your hands into the floor to help support yourself as you slowly and gently turn your head to the left side. Come into the starting position on this side. Stretch your right arm down by your side. Make sure your left elbow is extending straight out to the side away from your body.

(Repeat movement sequence on left side.)