



Head Lifts

The Head Lifts allow you to release and regain control of the muscles in your neck, chest, and abdominals. The Head Lifts involve lying on the back with the knees bent up and hands behind the head, and lifting and slowly lowering the head. This exercise helps to relieve neck pain, forward head posture, and cervical radiculopathy.

EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

Starting Position: Lie down on your back with your knees bent up and pointing toward the ceiling, and your knees and feet a comfortable hip width distance apart. Bring your hands up behind your head and interlace your fingers, and let your elbows relax out to the sides.

Movement: Pretend that there is a dinner plate balancing on your face and you need to make sure it doesn't tip. Inhale into your lower belly, and then exhale and do a gentle flatten with your lower back. Using your hands to help support your head, lift your head off the floor toward the ceiling, and make sure that dinner plate on your face stays flat and parallel to the ceiling. In other words, don't tuck your chin down toward your chest. Now release as slowly and as smoothly as you can to lower your head to the floor. Really try to resist gravity as you come down. Repeat this movement one more time if you want to. If you find that this movement hurts your neck, please do not do it.

Variation: Do this movement with your head turned to the right and then to the left.

ANATOMY OF HEAD LIFTS

The Head Lifts work with the muscles that flex the cervical and thoracic spine forward:

- Sternocleidomastoid
- Anterior scalene
- Longus capitis
- Longus colli
- Rectus abdominis

*In the Head Lifts variations, in which the head is turned to either side, the upper trapezius and the middle and posterior scalenes are engaged as well.

CONDITIONS HELPED BY THE HEAD LIFTS

The Head Lifts directly address the following conditions:

- Neck pain
- Forward head posture
- Cervical radiculopathy

HOW TO TEACH THE HEAD LIFTS

Get the student in their starting position. The student should lie down on their back with their knees bent up and pointing toward the ceiling, and their knees and feet a comfortable hip width distance apart. Instruct your student to bring their hands up behind their head and interlace their fingers, and let their elbows relax out to the sides.

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.

Teach the Head Lifts. Tell your student to pretend that there is a dinner plate balancing on their face, and they need to make sure it doesn't tip while they do this movement. Instruct your student to inhale into their lower belly, and then exhale and gently flatten their lower back down into the floor. Keeping their back flattened, the student can lift their head off the floor toward the ceiling, using their hands to help support their head. They should *not* tuck their chin; they should keep that dinner plate balanced on their face, parallel to the ceiling. Ask your student to notice if they feel their upper abdominals and muscles in their neck contracting. Then instruct your student to release as slowly as they possibly can. The student can repeat this movement one more time if they want to. ***If this movement causes neck pain, the student should not do it.**

Teach the variations. Instruct your student to turn their head to the right and do the movement in the same way, one or two times. Then instruct your student to turn their head to the left and do the movement one or two times.

Notes:

If this exercise is painful for your student, they should not do it.

It is most beneficial to practice the Arch & Flatten, Arch & Curl, and then the Head Lifts.

If your student has significant forward head posture or kyphosis, you can place a thin pillow or towel under their head. You should only do this if resting the head directly on the floor is uncomfortable and places stress on the student's neck. As their muscles release, the hope is that the student will be able to do the exercise without the pillow or towel.

Common mistakes:

The most common mistake in the Head Lifts is not inhaling and flattening first, and keeping the back flattened while lifting and lowering the head. It is important to keep the back flattened down into the floor in order to support and protect the neck in this exercise.

The following is an example of how I teach the Head Lifts:

Lie down on your back on your carpet or exercise mat. Come into your neutral starting position, with your knees bent and your feet on the floor, a comfortable hip width distance apart. Bring your hands up behind your head, interlace your fingers, and let your elbows relax out to the sides.

Pretend there is a dinner plate balancing on your face and you need to make sure it doesn't tip. Inhale into your lower belly, and then exhale and do a gentle flatten with your lower back. Keep your back flattened throughout the exercise. Using your hands to help support your head, lift your head off the floor toward the ceiling, and make sure that dinner plate on your face stays flat and parallel to the ceiling. In other words, don't tuck your chin down toward your chest. Notice what muscles are contracting to help you lift up your head - your upper abdominals and the muscles in your neck are working to help you do this movement. Now release them as slowly and as smoothly as you can to lower your head to the floor. Really try to resist gravity as you come down, and when your head reaches the floor, just relax. You can repeat this movement one more time if you want to. If you find that this movement hurts your neck, please do not do it.

Inhale into your lower belly, and then exhale and do a gentle flatten with your lower back. Lift your head off the floor toward the ceiling, and make sure that dinner plate on your face stays flat and parallel to the ceiling. Notice what muscles you feel contracting. Now release them as slowly and as smoothly as you can to lower your head to the floor, and then relax.

Let's do two variations on this movement. With your hands still behind your head, gently turn your head to the right. You'll do that same head lifting movement with your head turned. First inhale into your lower belly, relaxing your belly muscles and letting your lower belly fill up. As you exhale, flatten your lower back down into the floor, and keeping the left side of your face parallel to the ceiling – don't tuck your chin – gently lift your head off the floor. Notice what muscles are working, and notice how this position feels different for your neck. Lower down as slowly and with as much control as you can. Rest for a moment, then repeat this one more time if you want to.

First inhale into your lower belly, then as you exhale, flatten your lower back down into the floor. Keep the left side of your face parallel to the ceiling and gently lift your head off the floor. Then lower down as slowly as you can, and relax.

Now, gently roll your head to the left. Inhale into your lower belly, relaxing your belly muscles and letting your lower belly fill up. As you exhale, flatten your lower back down into the floor, and keeping the right side of your face parallel to the ceiling – don't tuck your chin – gently lift your head off the floor. Notice what muscles are working, and notice how this position feels different for your neck. Lower down as slowly and with as much control as you can. Rest for a moment, then repeat this one more time if you want to.

First inhale into your lower belly, then as you exhale, flatten your lower back down into the floor. Keep the right side of your face parallel to the ceiling and gently lift your head off the floor. Then lower down as slowly as you can.

When you're done, take your hands out from behind your head, and relax.