

The Roll Up / Roll Down.

People with spinal disc problems should consult a doctor or physical therapist before doing this, or any, spinal flexion exercise

Often done as the first exercise in a Pilates mat session, the roll up and roll down will develop your core as you articulate and lengthen your spine. Your goal is to stretch your spine around your strong supportive core, your powerhouse, lengthening the body as you roll up and through, again as you roll back down. This is not a sit-up or crunch.



- 1.) Position yourself on the mat lying on your back, legs extended long and straight, heels together, feet turned out in a slight V, toes flexed gently back toward the knees. Float your arms up, pointing them straight to the sky while keeping your shoulders wide and down on the back. Be aware that your shoulders do not move up toward your ears (turning your palms to face each other and imagining that you are squeezing a beach ball can help with the shoulder posture.) Visualize the strong connection of grounding.

2.) Inhale to prepare. As you begin a long controlled exhale:

Squeeze your heels together, activating the inner thighs.

Find your grounding as you engage up through your powerhouse to the bottom of the ribs. Scoop your belly, drawing your navel to your spine and perhaps up a bit toward the ribs as complete engagement is found.

Lead from the top of your head as you begin the roll up. First the back of the head leaves the mat as the neck begins to round. When your chin about is an inch from your chest the top vertebra of the upper spine between the shoulders leaves the mat.

Move your arms with the body as you continue rolling up. One vertebra at a time peels off the mat. Aggressively scoop your belly with the inner abdominals, and stretch the round back forward around your strong powerhouse. As the bottom of the shoulder blades leave the mat, the lower back presses into the mat as you continue to round your back, stretching it around the powerhouse, and peel each vertebra in succession off the mat.



My back is round, my belly aggressively scooped, and the tailbone presses into the mat as each vertebra of my lower spine is peeled off the mat in succession. The curve of my neck follows the curve of my spine as the top of my head leads the way, lengthening the spine around the powerhouse. Hip flexors relax as my heels press together and into the floor activating the inner thighs and hamstrings.



Don't extend your neck by looking forward. Lead with the top of your head.
Look at your knees.

As your shoulders pass over your hips, keep the back round like a wheel. Your belly is scooped (belly button to the spine) as the top of your head reaches toward your feet. Your hands reach forward towards (or past) your feet. Your lungs are empty. Squeeze out every bit of air before you inhale into the back, keeping the powerhouse strong, and exhale as you unwind the back, “stacking it up” from bottom to top and sit up straight and tall on your sit bones, arms extended out parallel to the floor.

3.) Inhale to prepare the roll down. As you begin the long exhale:

Scoop the belly, tuck the pelvis by rolling back onto the tailbone and bring the chin toward the chest as you round your back.

Stretch the spine around the powerhouse as you roll down with control. Imprint each vertebra in sequence onto the mat. Stretch out the back as you work patiently through the lower spine. The chin stays close to the chest as the bottom of your shoulder blades reach the mat and you work through each vertebra of the upper back. The roll down ends as you lengthen the neck and the head touches down.

The lungs are empty. Inhale as you check that your shoulders are wide and down, the heels are squeezed together, legs are long, and the powerhouse is engaged. As you start the long exhale begin the next roll up, leading from the top of your head. Try to do ten repetitions without relaxing your powerhouse, if you can keep good form. Try to keep

your airway open, controlling your breathe from your diaphragm. The exercise should be done at an even pace without any jerking or dynamic movement. It should flow, and appear to be effortless.

Typical problems:

Feet come up off the mat:

This happens when you think you are using your abs to lift your head and move your upper body toward your feet, but actually you are recruiting your hip flexors as you pull your legs to your head. A good way to work through this problem is to do partial roll downs. Start sitting up straight and tall on your sitz bones, then round the back (tuck the pelvis, scoop the belly, chin toward the chest) and begin to roll down only going as far as you can without lifting your feet. Roll back up from there leading from the top of the head. Focus your mind on relaxing the hip flexors and finding the inner abs and powerhouse. Never ever have an assistant hold your feet down, learn to relax the hip flexors and engage your powerhouse instead.

Difficulty initiating the roll up from lying flat:

Once the powerhouse is engaged (remember your grounding,) the key to starting the roll up with ease is to lead the movement from the top of the head and drive the movement with your breath. Also, try doing the half roll downs above. Go as deep into the roll down as you can, while still being able to roll back up. Soon you will be going all the way down and back.

Flaring of the ribs:

In grounding we learned to breathe in while controlling the ribs so they don't flare out away from the abs. Keeping this connection of ribs to abs takes concentration and control. My own teacher is still frequently cueing me on this even after years. The technique called back breathing, filling the lungs into the back, helps to enable this connection.

Progressing the exercise:

As an introduction, we have been starting the roll up with the arms extended straight up toward the ceiling. This makes monitoring good shoulder posture easier, but a proper roll up begins with the arms extended fully overhead. When you begin with the arms overhead only the arms move until they reach the straight up position. Then begin to roll up the body leading from the top of the head.

This adds an extra element of flow to the exercise, lengthens the exhale and inhale, and adds more concentration to keep the shoulders drawn down onto the back, never "shrugging" up toward the ears.

To increase the intensity and flow, keep the back rounded and move into the next repetition. Only after all your reps are finished do you sit up straight and tall. Take half as many breaths, exhaling on the roll up and inhaling on the roll down. Move with continuous flow, with barely a pause at each end. Squeeze every last bit of air from the lungs at the end of the roll up and fill them generously, breathing into the back as you roll down.

I like using light hand weights to add variety to the routine. This does not really make the core work easier or more difficult. It just changes the dynamic – for me getting started is a bit harder but following through with a nice round back is easier. Your experience may vary. It does challenge the shoulders. Only use weights when you can really support your shoulders from your back, keeping the work out of your neck and traps, never letting the shoulders creep up toward you ears. If your neck is stressing think about relaxing your tongue for starters.

Another great add-on for the roll up is to squeeze hand strength grippers as you roll up and roll down. Relax and re-engage the grip at each end. Work the connection from your hands and forearms through your upper arms and shoulders, to the back and all the way to your core. Experiment with various rotations of the arm (from the shoulder,) such as palms up, palms facing in, and facing down. Only use grippers when you have enough control that you do not let the extra work create tension in the shoulders and neck.