

basics

pigeon pose

by Natasha Rizopoulos

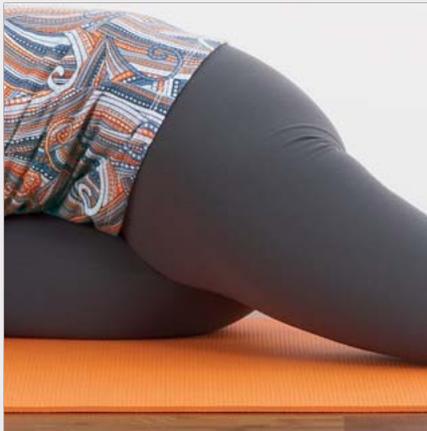
# Get Hip

Learn proper alignment in Pigeon Pose and enjoy a safe and sweet hip opener.

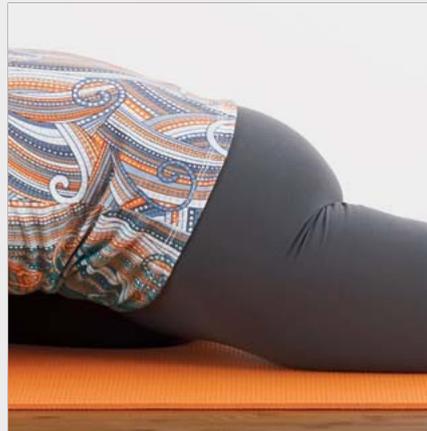
**YOGA HANDLES STIFF** hips in a variety of ways, but most directly through a family of poses that are known loosely as “hip openers.” Some hip openers increase the external, or outward, rotation of the femur bone in the hip socket. Others lengthen the psoas muscle, a primary hip flexor connecting the torso and legs that gets chronically shortened in our chair-bound society. Pigeon Pose is an extremely effective hip opener that addresses both areas, with the front leg working in external rotation and the back leg in position to stretch the psoas.

Pigeon is actually a variation of the advanced pose, Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose). The two poses share similar alignment in the hips and, more important, an imperative to be approached thoughtfully and consciously. Most practitioners recognize that One-Legged King Pigeon is an advanced backbend that requires precise alignment. Yet many of us are likely to thoughtlessly fold into the forward-bend variation of Pigeon, which can put a lot of stress on the knee and sacrum. To avoid injury, I approach Pigeon by first doing variations that will open the hips gradually and safely. Once your hips are open, you'll





**DON'T** Fall off to one side.



**DO** Have your hips even and level.

Maintain level sacrum

Keep leg in neutral rotation

Support front hip with floor or blankets



be able to craft a well-balanced Pigeon that benefits your hips and lower back. If you practice it consistently, you'll notice more ease in your lower half as you sit, walk, and stand.

#### THREAD THE NEEDLE

One of the best ways to open the hips and prepare for Pigeon is through a supine modification called Eye of the Needle (sometimes called Dead Pigeon). I teach this pose to first timers and practice it myself on a regular basis. As you move through this and the next variation, and then toward the final pose, make sure that you alternate sides so that your body can unfold evenly and progressively.

To begin, come onto your back with your knees bent and your thighs parallel and hip-distance apart. Next, cross your left ankle over your right thigh, making sure that your anklebone clears your thigh. Actively flex your front foot by pulling your toes back. When you do this, the center of your foot will line up with your kneecap rather than curving into a sickle shape, which can stress the ligaments of the ankle and the knee.

Maintaining this alignment, pull your right knee in toward your chest, thread your left arm through the triangle between your legs and clasp your hands around the back of your right leg. If you can hold in front of your shin without lifting your shoulders off the floor or rounding the upper back, do so; otherwise, keep your hands clasped around your hamstring or use a strap. The goal is to avoid creating tension in the neck and shoulders as you

open the hips, so choose a position that keeps your upper body relaxed. As you draw your right leg in toward you (making sure to aim it toward your right shoulder and not the center of your chest), simultaneously press your left knee away from you. This combination of actions should provide ample sensation, but if you don't feel much, try releasing your pubic bone down away from your navel toward the floor. This will bring a bit more curve into your lumbar and should deepen the hip stretch.

#### BOOST YOUR BIRD

This variation moves more in the direction of the final shape but uses blankets to help maintain alignment. Come onto all fours with your hands shoulder-distance apart and about a hand span in front of your shoulders. Bring your left knee forward and place it on the floor just behind and slightly to the left of your left wrist, with your shin on a diagonal and your left heel pointing toward your right frontal hipbone. Now bring your attention to your back leg: Your right quadriceps should squarely face the floor so that your leg is in a "neutral" position—you want to avoid the common pitfall of externally rotating the back leg. Establish this neutral leg by tucking your right toes under and

## Pose Benefits

Increases external range of motion of femur in hip socket

Lengthens hip flexors

Prepares body for backbends

Prepares body for seated postures such as Padmasana (Lotus Pose)

## Contraindications

Knee injury

Sacroiliac issues



straightening your right leg so that the thigh and knee come off the floor. Lift your right inner thigh up toward the ceiling and move your right frontal hipbone forward so that it is parallel to your left frontal hipbone. You want to have your hipbones square toward the front of the mat. As you roll your right hipbone forward, draw your left outer hip back and in toward the midline of your body. Its natural tendency will be to swing forward and out away from you.

When the hipbones are parallel in Pigeon, the sacrum is less likely to be torqued, and you can practice the pose without straining your low back. Maintaining this hip alignment, shimmy your right toes back slightly and then point them so that your right thigh releases to the floor. Move your left foot and shin toward the front of your mat, aiming for your shin to be parallel to the front edge, and flex your foot the way you did in Eye of the Needle to protect your knee.

Now observe your left outer hip. If, after you square your hips, the area where your thigh and buttock meet doesn't rest on the floor, you need to add a blanket or two underneath. This is crucial to practicing the pose safely. If the outer hip doesn't have support, the body will fall to the left, making the hips uneven and distorting the sacrum. Or, if the hips stay square but your left hip is free floating, you'll put too much weight and pressure on the front knee. Neither scenario is good!

#### GET EVEN

Instead, use your arms for support as you organize your lower body. Adjust so that your hipbones are parallel to the wall you're facing and your sacrum is even (meaning one side hasn't dipped closer to the floor than the other) and place however many blankets are necessary to maintain this alignment beneath your left outer hip.

Place your hands in front of your left shin and use your arms to keep your torso upright. For the final version, keep moving your left foot forward, working to make

## hip connections

People tend to either love or loathe poses like Pigeon. Regardless of which camp you inhabit, keep in mind that Pigeon can help safeguard your precious knees and low back and make myriad poses infinitely more pleasant. Here's a look at the tremendous benefits of hip openers.

- ◆ Open hips can mean less back pain. Tight hip flexors pull your pelvis forward and exaggerate the curve in your lower back. Picture your entire pelvis as a bowl of water spilling toward your toes, with the back side of the bowl raised up. When your lumbar becomes shortened, you're likely to feel compression and discomfort over time. You'll notice it in your poses, too. If your hip flexors are short in a pose like Warrior I or Camel, your lower back will overdo the arch, and you'll feel pain. Open hip flexors help bring the pelvis back to neutral and mitigate pain.
- ◆ Hip openers help your knees. Here's an example: When your outer hips are relatively open in a pose like Warrior II,

you'll be able to rotate your front thigh out and line up your front knee toward the pinky side of the toes. But if that area is tight, your knee will buckle in toward your big toe, which can strain the inner knee. So if you're unable to externally rotate the femur bone in the hip socket (which is one result of tight hips), the smaller and more delicate knee joint can become overworked.

- ◆ The hip is a ball-and-socket joint constructed for movement in a whole slew of directions, including rotation (as opposed to the knee, which is a hinge joint that it is supposed to bend and extend but not rotate). The great thing about Pigeon is that if you practice it on both sides, you get flexion and extension of your knees and your hips. The added bonus is that you get external rotation of the femur in your hip socket, too. Barring injury, it's a good idea to regularly take your joints through their full range of motion in your yoga practice—you'll move through your daily life with more ease.

your left shin parallel to the front edge of your mat. Make sure that in doing so you maintain the alignment in your hips and sacrum, continuing to use blankets if necessary. The left leg will be in external rotation, the right leg in neutral—each position giving access to a different type of hip opening. The right leg will stretch the psoas and other hip flexors, and the left side will get into the group of rotators in the buttocks and outer hip.

It's common to experience intense sensations in the left hip as the femur rotates outward in the hip socket. (For many people, this is in the fleshy part of the buttock; for others, it's along the inner thigh.) Some feel a stretch along the front of the right hip as the psoas lengthens. You *do not*, however, want to feel any sensations in your left knee. If you do, this variation is not for you! Return to Eye of the Needle, where you can safely open your hips without strain.

If your knee is sensation free (hooray!), extend your torso forward across your left shin, walking your arms out in front of you and releasing your forehead toward the floor. Fold forward only after you've spent time checking your alignment and paying attention to your body. Your left knee will be to the left of your torso (with the left thigh on a bit of a diagonal), and your flexed left foot will be just alongside the right side of your rib cage. As you fold forward, turn your attention inward. We tend to hold this version of Pigeon longer than more active postures, so see if part of your practice in this pose can be to stay mentally focused once you have settled in. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali defines practice as "effort toward steadiness." In these extended, quieter holds, you get to explore this idea, tethering your sometimes scattered attention by following the breath as it moves in and out, finding stillness as you open and expand. ■

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