

Assessing Range of Motion in Downward Dog

Students who struggle with Downward-Facing Dog may have limited range of motion (ROM) in one or more of four important joints. Learn how to assess your students' ROM and help them modify their Down Dog.

By Paul Grilley

Long Dogs and Short Dogs

Downward-Facing Dog is one of the most popular asanas because it works several different parts of the body at once. By slightly altering the Down Dog alignment, it can become several different poses. This variability is why Down Dog shows up in so many different sequences and classes.



There are many subtle variations of Downward-Facing Dog, but they can be divided into two standard variations: Long Dogs and Short Dogs. Stepping further back with the feet produces Long Dogs. The arms and shoulders bear more weight in these poses. To perform Short Dogs, step back only a little, not as far as in a normal Down Dog. Short Dogs are more like a forward bend in that less weight is on the hands and more is on the feet.

Long Dog works the shoulders and spine. It requires more strength from the chest, torso, shoulders, and arms. The precaution to take when teaching Long Dog is to be sure the students' hands or feet do not slip. This may require them to brace their feet against a wall, while using a mat with good traction for their hands.

Long Dog also works the calf muscles. When a student steps back into a Long Dog, the ankle joint must flex more if the heels are to stay on the ground. This results in a deeper stretch of the calf muscles.

If you want to isolate the shoulders or spine but don't want your students to step back into a Long Dog, then have them slightly bend both knees instead. This makes it easier to push their hips back and isolate the shoulders and spine, but it doesn't require as much upper body strength as the basic Long Dog.

Short Dog, on the other hand, works the hamstrings. It requires less upper body strength but more hamstring flexibility. Sometimes Short Dog is also preferable because it takes some weight, and therefore strain, off of the arms and wrists.

The Four Sections of Downward Dog

Downward Dog affects four specific sections of the body: the shoulders, spine, hamstrings, and calves. Simple tests explore students' range of motion (ROM) in each of these areas. Once you have determined which body section you are trying to emphasize, you can suggest that your students adopt the appropriate variation of Long Dog or Short Dog.

Testing Shoulder ROM

Have your student kneel down on the mat while you stand immediately behind him. You should gently brace your knee against his back so you don't pull him off balance. Ask him to raise both arms up. Gently take hold of his wrists and draw his arms back toward his ears. Keep gently pulling until you feel you are starting to pull the student backward against your knee. When doing this test, it is important that the student keep his shoulders down.

Some students can have their arms pulled back until they are nearly vertical. Others can hardly raise their arms more than halfway. If a student has difficulty raising the arms, you might suggest Long Dog or Bent Knees. It is important to caution students not to be aggressive with these variations. The ultimate limit to shoulder movement is the shape of the bones. If a student naively tries to "open" the shoulders when the bones are compressed, he could injure himself. Any pain in the shoulder should be avoided. A student should work only with the intention of gentle stretching.

Testing Spinal ROM

Down Dog is not particularly effective for working the lower spine. Poses such as Cobra or Camel are much more effective for that area. But Down Dog is good at isolating the thoracic spine between the shoulder blades. The thoracic spine does not have much range of motion, but maintaining the ROM that does exist is important for posture, relieving muscle tension, and dispersing stagnant chi in the area.

The test for this area is very similar to the test for the shoulders. The student kneels down while you stand directly behind her. Your knee should be gently braced against her back. The student raises her arms up as before, but this time when you take hold and gently pull her back, encourage her to let her shoulders rise up and back. Her arms will go much further back when her shoulders are up than when her shoulders are down, as in the shoulder test. This is because the scapulae move back and squeeze together. This results in a pleasant pressure or "push" on the thoracic spine, much like someone pressing her hands onto the spine. This push in the back, and the corresponding expansion of the chest in the front, is very pleasant and very beneficial for our health and posture.

Some students' arms will come back nearly 45 degrees behind their ears. Others pull back only slightly. It is sometimes effective to have a student keep her head up when trying to isolate the spine in these poses.

If a student is restricted in this area, you can suggest Long Dog or Bent Knees.

Testing Hamstring ROM

Have your student stand in the middle of the room with arms at his sides and feet about hip width apart. Now ask him to bend forward, keeping his spine and legs straight. He should be able to tilt his pelvis to slightly below horizontal without rounding his spine. If he cannot do this, then his hamstrings are tight and you can suggest he practice Short Dog.

Testing Ankle ROM

How effectively a student can stretch the calf muscles is determined by how much she can flex the ankles. The more she can flex the ankles, the more she can stretch the calf muscles and Achilles tendons. So the test for calf muscle ROM is also a test of ankle ROM.

Ask your student to kneel on the left knee with the right foot on the floor. This is the starting position for a simple lunge. Now ask your student to bend the front knee and sink down toward the floor. She may use her hands for balance. As she sinks lower, the right ankle must bend. She should stop sinking down as soon as her right heel lifts off the floor. This is the limit to her ankle ROM. You can easily measure the angle of ankle bend using your finger and thumb, or by using two pencils. Whatever angle you measure is the limit for the student's ankle flexion when practicing Downward Dog.

If your student has tight calf muscles, suggest Long Dog. A variation is called "Walking Your Heels." Ask the student assume a normal Down Dog and then bend one leg and shift most of the weight to the straight leg. This allows more body weight to push back into the ankle and stretch the calf muscles. Alternating sides gives this variation its name.

If your student has flexible ankles, she will be able to practice Long Dog and still keep the heels on the ground. If your student has restricted ankle ROM, then she might be unable to keep her heels on the floor in even a modest Down Dog. If this is the case, it is important you remind her that the stretch on the calves is important.

A Pose by Any Other Name...

The definition of a "normal" Down Dog is tricky to come up with. Should a "normal" Down Dog be one in which there is equal weight on hands and feet, should it be when both heels are on the ground, or should it be when the arms are extended and in line with the spine? Any one of these is a legitimate definition, and each results in a different looking pose.

It is also challenging to determine when a pose is a modification and when it can be considered a different pose altogether. A Short Dog can become so short that appears to be a variation of Standing Forward Bend. A Long Dog can become so long that it places students in a strenuous pushup position.

Rather than be concerned with a rigidly defined and "proper" Downward-Facing Dog, explore all its variations in your classes, emphasizing different parts of the body in any given sequence.

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