

Alexander Lie Down Position
(also called the Semi-supine or Constructive Rest Position)



An Introduction to the Lie-Down Position

This exercise has three common names as listed above, each of which describes it in a slightly different way. Supine means lying on one's back, face looking upward at the ceiling, with legs stretched out. Semi-supine implies that we are not completely supine, and Alexander suggested bent knees in order to release the lower back onto the supporting surface. The Lie-Down exercise is found to be a very effect resting position, yet it is more than merely restful. Not only does it give us an opportunity to undo the excess habitual tensions of our daily lives, but it also has the profound effect of reorganizing the head, neck, and spine. Therefore it is restorative and "constructive" as well as restful.

Lie down on your back on a firm surface with your head on 1-2 inches of paperback books, your knees bent with feet flat on the floor, approximately hip-width apart. The firm surface can be a carpeted floor, an exercise mat or something similar, but not a mattress, unless it is a very compact futon. Some people have very tender sacrums or bony protruding vertebrae, and in these cases they need sufficient padding to enable them to release onto the firm surface comfortably. For them, the carpeted floor may be too hard.

The amount of books under your head varies according to your current posture: If you are round-shouldered, you will need more books, perhaps 2 inches or more. If you are very flat through the upper back and shoulder area, you will need less, perhaps as little as 1 inch. If you have too few books, your head will fall back down to the floor and your chin will be cocked up toward the ceiling. If you have too many books, the front of your throat and the larynx will feel squashed. The intention is to give just enough of a lift to the head so that gravity provides a safe and gentle traction to the spine, beginning with the neck and traveling all the way down the spine to the tailbone.

Comfortably plant your feet so that your knees do not flop outward. Sometimes this might mean putting the feet more than hip-width apart. Or you may find that you need to let the knees lean toward or onto each other in order to prevent over-tensing of the leg or hip-joint muscles. The point is to find a place to park your feet that allows your bent legs to be at ease without having to hold anything tightly to keep them there. Think about releasing (do not push or directly move) your lower back to the floor and see if you can temporarily let go of any excess muscular work that you thought you needed for standing upright. Your hands can rest on the tummy, with elbows pointing away from each other. Alternatively, the hands can lie palms down alongside the torso, or palms up slightly away from your sides—whatever seems to you a restful position for your shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints.

With your head resting on the books, and gravity working with you, your neck receives a very gentle extension. This extension can gradually work its way through to the other end of the spine. As a result, you may feel taller when you get up from the Lie-Down. However, if the muscles that lie alongside the spine are very tightly held, you won't find much lengthening of the back from a single Lie-Down. Repeated experience with this procedure is likely to bring gradual changes. Part of what can happen in a 15-20 minutes Lie-Down is simply to quiet the busy chatterbox mind. Here is an opportunity to be aware in the present moment, observing habitual patterns of unnecessary tension. Some Alexander students use the time for meditation; some listen to music; some spend the time thinking their way through all of the joints and muscles of which they are aware, asking for expansion or release rather than contraction. Those who are particularly stiff and relatively inflexible often find that they need a longer time for their overly tense muscles to relax. They get more benefit from at least 30 minutes in this position.

Whatever your level of sensitivity, know that by simply letting the position and gravity do their work, several things can happen over time. The neck (top of the spine) gets a gentle bit of traction, and that request for more space between the vertebrae can travel down to the tailbone. The muscles of both the front and the back of the torso can relax, thus allowing the torso to broaden out in coordination with the lengthening of the spine. The third dimension—between the floor and your chest—can also become less contracted, providing more internal room for all your organs.

Breathing Benefits form the Lying-Down Exercise

We may begin to notice a freer rib cage as the back releases into its natural length and width. Because the rib cage will have gravity working upon it in a different manner than when we are sitting or standing, intercostal muscle elasticity may be more easily awakened. When we sense that these rib cage muscles are less stuck or more elastic, we can begin to allow the breath to come back in after an exhale. This allowing or letting-it-happen mode of breathing may be counter to our habitual way.

In addition to freeing up the breath, we can also experience through the exercise an improved head-neck coordination. The head-neck relationship ultimately can lead to a more general undoing of excess muscular work. Specifically, the Lie-Down facilitates

release of the TM joint, thus lessening lower jaw and neck tension for those who find it hard to relax these areas when standing.

The biggest advantage of making the Lie-Down a part of our lives—either in the middle of the day or when we first get home from our day’s activities—is a healthy rejuvenation of the spinal discs. These inter-vertebral discs (the spongy cushions lying between the vertebrae) are amazing in what they are asked to do over a lifetime. The discs help cushion the bones that are stacked up on top of each other, thus making up the spine. With advancing age, we are taught by our culture that we will inevitably shrink in overall stature, much of this height being lost through the spine.

What does this have to do with breathing? Anything that affects the spine, its flexibility, and its overall length affect the diaphragm, which is attached to the spine. It also affects the rib cage muscles, which expand and contract the ribs. The ribs themselves are extensions out from the spine and make the cage that protects the heart and the lungs. Lying down (with bent knees and head on books) and letting go of excess muscle tension allows the torso to expand three-dimensionally. It also creates an opportunity for fluid to “plump up” the inter-vertebral discs. Constantly circulating blood feeds the bone cells (of the vertebrae in this case) and the discs imbibe the fluid from the bone cells. If we can do a daily Lie-Down in the middle of the day, we not only get up refreshed, but we’ve had a chance to restore some of the cushioning effect of plumped-up discs.

If we learn to ease the spine into its natural length every day of our lives, we may be better able to maintain our full adult height into old age. If we allow gravity and daily time to redistribute fluid within our system, our discs do not need to become so permanently squashed over time. Shortening of stature is not just a matter of plump versus squashed discs, of course. Too much curvature of the spine from habitually slumping or slouching effectively shortens us. If the torso muscles are overly constricted, they can also compress the spine and not let it release into its natural length. We have more resilience and restorative power than we realize.

THINK ABOUT YOUR HEAD RELEASING AWAY FROM THE TAILBONE