

This method  
can be  
an excellent  
way to  
tone your  
muscles,  
and prolong  
your career.

# body rolling

for fun and fitness

**By Stephanie Golden**  
Photos by Chip Williams



In addition to their use as self-therapy, the Yamuna Body Rolling routines can also be done with clients. This photo shows the hands-on work for the posterior neck. The client is in supine position, with the ball supporting the cervical spine, as therapist Yamuna Zake tractions both shoulders down away from the head.



## As massage therapists well know, repetitive stress injury is a common hazard for practitioners.

Indeed, shoulder, back, neck and wrist problems are a major reason for the high rate of burnout in the profession. Fortunately, you can avoid such an outcome by practicing effective self-care.

One way to do this is small-ball therapy. There are many variations of this practice, but one in particular, called Yamuna Body Rolling (YBR), can be especially effective for alleviating the common ailments associated with doing massage therapy. It was designed specifically to offer a simple, yet profound, way to maintain the health of your neuromuscular system by literally rolling the stress patterns out of your body after your workday.

“YBR is a self-therapy that enables you to do deep-tissue massage on your own body, preventing and healing injuries, so that you can keep doing the work you love,” says Yamuna Zake, the method’s creator.

This technique has several applications for a massage therapist. You can use it to prevent or heal repetitive stress injuries, give yourself a daily deep-tissue massage and turn your own body into an educational tool that offers a direct experience of muscle release. It also is a hands-on modality you can adapt to your practice. Finally, you can teach it to your clients to do at home, enhancing the work you do with them in treatment sessions.

YBR grew out of Body Logic, a hands-on therapy that Zake, a former yoga teacher, created about 25 years ago (see sidebar, page 50). After 15 years of practicing Body Logic, she began working with a ball to invent a system that would enable people to do for themselves what she did for them in a Body Logic session. The result was YBR, which is practiced on 6- to 10-inch balls (see sidebar, page 53) according to a series of routines designed for different parts of the body. Each routine is performed in a specific sequence that follows the logic of the neuromuscular system: starting on bone at a muscle’s origin, then moving toward its insertion. “Muscles release from origin to insertion,” explains Zake. “When you use the ball to apply gentle traction at the origin, the muscle begins to release toward its insertion.”

### Stimulation Of Bone

A core principle of YBR is bone stimulation. We often think of bone as solid, but in fact it has many layers; it’s porous and flex-

ible, and is meant to be much more pliable than it actually is in most people. As bone ages, it loses its porousness and the permeability between its different layers. The harder bone gets, the less circulation there is between the layers. If bone is brittle because it has suffered too much impact, it will pull tendons in toward it, and their associated muscles will be continuously pulled in toward the bone as well, restricting movement.

For this reason, to achieve complete muscle release, the YBR work begins with bone. Lying over the ball, you place the ball at a muscle’s origin point on a bone, and wait for 15 to 30 seconds. The weight of the body on the ball applies direct, gentle pressure that increases circulation to the tendon, which begins to soften and release. Only then do you roll out into tendon, and finally into muscle. You roll toward the insertion in small increments, pausing at each point to take a full breath (or several breaths at tight points). But you don’t need to roll all the way to the insertion, since the stimulation of the tendon initiates a release through the entire muscle.

Bone stimulation enables YBR to rapidly create positive structural changes, says Zake, who uses YBR to help treat osteoarthritis, osteoporosis and other bone problems. In response to direct stimulation, arthritic and brittle bone—which is in a contracted state—will release, leading all the tendons that have attachments to that bone to expand outward and initiate a release in their muscles. “When I use YBR as a hands-on therapy,” Zake says, “I can feel this change in bone happen. When I apply pressure, bone that is hard, with no give in it, becomes softer. Along with this soft quality I feel an increase in energy; the bone has a pulsing, alive quality. It’s like the difference between pushing your finger against a wall and sinking it into a softer, more flexible substance.”

### Breathing In YBR

Another basic principle of YBR is use of the breath, not only to enhance muscle release but also as a tool for correcting structure. In YBR, the ball becomes the focus point for breathing. With the ball at any point on the torso, you direct the breath to the spot where the ball is. The body naturally expands out against the ball on the inhalation, then sinks into it during the exhalation.

YBR breathing works the deeper muscles of the torso that often remain tight, contracted, restricted, atrophied or simply out of harmony with the externally visible muscles. Inhaling against the ball expands and stretches these muscles, from the

This photo shows the hands-on assist for the neck and shoulder. (See text section on page 56.) One hand tractions the shoulder down to the floor, away from the head. The other hand tractions the head and neck down and around the ball.



inside out. The more the lungs expand, the more open the whole thorax becomes and the more stimulation the muscles receive, since they are all stretching and contracting. In this way YBR balances the deep and superficial muscle layers. While working on the legs, you cannot feel the inhalation pushing the body into the ball, but you can pace yourself by taking a full breath at each point as you roll. This helps you stay at each point long enough for the muscles to fully sink into the ball.

### Injury Prevention: A Key Benefit

Zake, who has taught body-therapy professionals around the world, says, “I often hear practitioners complain that they put out too much energy—they work too hard, they get exhausted and their bodies hurt. Many are so busy helping other people that they don’t take adequate care of themselves.” The work postures body-therapy practitioners most often assume become so embedded in their bodies that these patterns turn into their habitual, everyday postures. Over time, the work pattern

becomes a pain pattern that the practitioner lives with daily.

However, you can prevent work-related injury by undoing the effects of your work postures on your body at the end of the day. YBR enables you to identify your own specific postural patterns, then release them, muscle by muscle.

### Give Yourself A Deep-Tissue Massage

Even if you have no pain or injury, YBR offers a daily self-massage that can be as muscle-specific as you choose. You don’t always have someone around to work on you, but you can still give yourself an overall YBR session and keep yourself well aligned.

### Deepen Experiential Awareness Of Anatomy

As you roll out specific muscles, you learn to physically find the beginning of a muscle, sense from within what it feels like for that muscle to release and feel the direction in which it releases. You also have direct anatomical experience of different muscle connections. This experience is essential, says Zake, because there

## The Origins Of YBR

“In 1979, three days after my daughter was born, my left hip gave way; in the moment that it happened, I heard the bones separate,” recalls Zake. For two months she tried orthopedics, chiropractic, acupuncture and other modalities, none of which stabilized her femur in the hip joint or relieved the shooting pains in her side. Since she was a yoga teacher, she decided to use her yogic knowledge to figure the problem out herself.

Her theory was that the pressure on the pelvis during labor had caused microfibrer tears in her adductors, making the femur unstable in the acetabulum. Afterward, due to postpartum shock and exhaustion, these adductors temporarily lost their memory of function, so that only the hamstrings, iliotibial tract, and lateral quadriceps were keep-

ing the leg stabilized. The most lateral muscles were extremely tight to compensate for the inner-thigh weakness, so Zake began performing specific yoga postures while working with her hands to release this tightness. Within 10 days, the adductors were functioning again and the leg was more stable in the joint.

This experience led Zake to work with individual yoga students to help them get deeper into postures. Soon, people began coming to her with physical problems and injuries. She began formal study of anatomy and physiology, and ultimately created a therapy system she called Body Logic, in which she worked on the floor with the client lying over a pillow.

Body Logic is based on the principle that pain and restricted movement result

from compression and contraction in the body, and therefore can be relieved by creating space. It uses traction—both directly and with joint rotation—to create this space by elongating muscle. While one hand applies the traction, Zake uses the other elbow to work the origin point of each muscle. By exerting traction, she explains, you tell a muscle what direction to release in and enable it to lengthen toward its insertion. Elongating the muscle relieves pain due to nerve impingement, as in sciatica, and also creates mobility in the joint. Over the years, she has treated a wide variety of physical problems, ranging from postural misalignments to arthritis to herniated discs and vertebral subluxations.



This photo shows the lateral hands-on neck work. Here, one hand tractions the side of the head directly down and around the ball, while the other hand tractions the shoulder in the opposite direction.

involved in that person’s sciatica pattern and can give the client a ball routine that will work those particular muscles to maintain the longer resting length achieved during your session.

## A SAMPLE OF YBR ROUTINES

### Basic Back Routine

Because massage therapists work bent forward over the client, they are susceptible to lower back strain, trapezius tension, shortness in the latissimus dorsi and tightness in the shoulder girdle and back-of-neck muscles. The YBR basic back routine, which includes rolling up the back of the neck, helps break the bent-forward pattern by releasing all these muscles, creating length and improving alignment. The routine lifts the vertebrae one by one, reversing the downward pull in the spine, creating intervertebral space, and relieving pressure on the nerve roots. Since the ball rolls right next to the spine, the routine directly affects the erector spinae muscles as well, freeing holding patterns in these very tight muscles. Doing this routine in the morning sets up a well-aligned work posture; in the evening, it releases kinks that have built up during the day. To fully release a deep buildup of repetitive stress patterns, however, the side routine (described next) is crucial.

Zake has also developed advanced variations of the back routine that involve specific work on the quadratus lumborum and the large superficial back muscles all the way up the spine.

Teaching the back routine to clients will improve their posture. For those with back problems, the routine keeps the back muscles toned. For clients with lower back problems, elongating the spine and toning the muscles that support an upright posture will result in less tightness, making it easier for the therapist to work deeply on these muscles.

### Side Routine

When you work the side of the body, you are working the front and back together, for a few key lateral muscles link the muscles of the posterior and anterior torso. In this way you achieve maximum length in both posterior and anterior muscle chains simultaneously, balancing the torso between front and back. “I like to say that the shoulder begins in the hip,” notes Zake, since if the posterior or anterior muscle chains of the torso are contracted at any point, they pull the shoulder downward. For example, shoulder restrictions often begin when the latissimus

is not always a logical explanation for why certain releases happen—you simply must experience the types of connections that can occur. A shoulder release, for example, may be linked to a release in the hip. Or, releasing the sacrum may free up the neck and head. The more thoroughly you understand the many possible muscular and neurological connections in your own body, the more astute you become in your approach to clients.

### Add A Therapeutic Modality To Your Practice

As a hands-on therapy, YBR uses the weight of the client’s body lying over the ball, which acts as a fulcrum over which you traction the body part being worked on. Using the ball to disperse congestion, free joints, elongate muscle, and break up scar tissue is easier on your own body and gentle for the client, yet extremely effective (see the section Hands On Assist For The Neck And Shoulder, page 53).

### Empower Your Clients

Therapists who are keen on client education can give YBR to clients as a tool to use between sessions. For example, after working on someone with sciatica, you will know which muscles are





[Left] This photo demonstrates hands-on assist for the side routine. With the ball under the client's armpit, Zake uses one hand to apply direct pressure down into the right shoulder joint and stabilize the joint, while the other hand tractions the humerus out from the shoulder joint.



## BALLS FOR YBR

The balls used for YBR range from 6 to about 10 inches in diameter. Different bodies require different sizes and degrees of hardness, and the same person might want to use different balls to work different parts of the body. This method can be practiced on balls that are widely available in drugstores and sporting goods stores. However, drugstore balls, and any other hard balls, are not safe for anyone with any bone abnormality. Nor should you use a volleyball, basketball, golf ball or weighted medicine

ball; these could cause serious injury.

People who are frail, lack flexibility, are not physically active, or have structural problems or little muscle mass, should begin YBR with softer balls.

The most effective balls are dense and firm, but not hard; they yield to body weight while still offering some resistance. They make it possible to work individual muscles in a very focused way, while her softer balls make YBR available to people with injuries or conditions that make the bone brittle or rigid.

The yellow beginner, or basic, ball is softer and easier to sink into. The harder, denser red ball lets you work individual muscles in more detail and achieve greater releases. The smaller green ball has the same consistency as the yellow ball, and can sink more deeply into areas such as the neck or armpit.

dorsi lacks full range of motion. The side routine treats shoulder problems by working the muscles from the pelvis upward.

The routine begins by releasing the ilium downward. You then move the ball to the rib cage and roll up along the ribs into the armpit, then down the arm to the elbow. The arm is overhead, so all the muscles that begin in the lower back are elongated upward. In addition, the side routine (and more specifically its advanced variations) directly works all the muscles of the shoulder girdle—anterior and posterior—helping prevent shoulder joint restrictions. By fully releasing the triceps, biceps, brachioradialis and coracobrachialis, the side routine prevents shoulder and arm injuries and relieves pressure on the attachments of the neck muscles. Since this routine will maintain full range of motion in the shoulder joint, it is the most important one for massage therapists to practice.

For clients with lower back injuries, the side routine relieves pressure in the lower back, without directly working on the painful area, by toning the abdominal muscles and elongating the torso. Since it improves range of motion of the torso, shoulder and neck, having clients do this routine will make the work you do on their shoulder or lower back problems easier.

### Abdominal Routine

This is another key routine for massage therapists. If you stand working over people all day, and you have weak abdominal muscles, the weight of these muscles dropping into the pelvis weakens the lower back and encourages the chest to drop still further. Working with the ball directly in the abdomen tones and elongates the abdominal muscles so they can support you in your work posture. At the same time, the abdominal routine improves

organ function and repositions prolapsed organs, relieving the pressure they exert into the pelvis.

Weak abdominals also put pressure into the lower back and can lead to back injury. Elongating these muscles eliminates this pressure and helps stabilize and strengthen the lower back. Zake notes that to treat a painful lower back she starts the client on the abdominal routine, not the back routine.

Advanced variations of the abdominal routine enable you to work deeply into the psoas and iliacus. Releasing these muscles enables a body that has become frozen into a bent-forward position to stand upright with ease.

### Chest Routine

The chest routine also helps prevent the therapist from getting stuck in a bent-forward position. As you roll up the sternum, then over the pectoralis major and out to the shoulder and pectoralis minor on each side, you create length in these muscles, opening the chest and repositioning the shoulder joint. For clients who are told they need to stand up straight, but don't know how to do it, the chest routine makes upright posture effortless.

A two-minute version of the chest release is done standing up against a wall. For therapists in between clients, or office workers who sit hunched over a computer all day, this

routine greatly decreases the buildup of stress and tension in the neck and shoulders.

### Hands-On Assist For The Neck And Shoulder

This assist, performed as part of the basic back routine, is based on the concept that the neck and shoulders release more when the ball is pressing into the back of the head. The pressure of the ball just below the occiput releases the cervical spine from the cranium, and allows the cervical spine to achieve its maximum length.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROUTINES

### Basic Back Routine

Sit with the ball under the right sitbone. Roll around on the ischium a bit to begin releasing the hamstring, adductor magnus tendons and all the deep lateral rotators except the piriformis. Then roll up to the right side of the coccyx. With your knees bent, both feet flat on the floor and your hands or fingertips on the floor behind you, begin rolling up the sacrum in micromovements along the right sacroiliac joint, in increments of one-half to one inch. At each point, take a full breath, sinking your weight into the ball on each exhalation. Then roll to the next point.

As the ball reaches the top of the sacrum, slowly begin to curve the sacrum and pelvis down and around the ball. This action allows the ball to roll into the lumbar spine, lifting and supporting the lower back. Roll up the lumbar spine one vertebra at a time, inhaling as the ball lifts each vertebra and letting the sacrum drop down around the ball as you exhale. When both buttocks are resting on the floor, begin using one hand to support the head as you roll, to prevent compression of the cervical spine.

When you reach the thoracic spine, continue rolling up, one vertebra at a time, pressing the ball into the space between the spinous and transverse processes. If it is difficult to isolate each vertebrae, work two or three at a time. When the ball reaches the top of the scapula, pull the chin into the chest with both hands to stretch out the cervical spine. Roll up into the neck and rest the neck and head around the ball; the ball should fully support the neck. Bring the arms down to the sides, or use the left hand to keep the ball in place behind the head. Roll up the right cervical spine in micromovements. As you roll, work the right shoulder down to the floor and away from your head. Roll up to the highest point of the right side of the occiput.

Support the head and neck with one hand and use the other hand to take the ball away. Then slowly lower the head to the floor. Lie on your back and notice any differences between the right and left sides. Then repeat on the left side.

### Side Routine

Lie on your right side, legs extended and right arm straight with the palm pressing into the floor to support you. (Alternatively, you can come down onto your forearm.) Stretch the right side as long as possible. Place the ball at the right greater trochanter and roll up to the edge of the iliac crest. Take three deep breaths into the point where the ball is. On each exhalation, let the ball sink in just above the iliac crest. The ball should not touch the ribs.

Now take the ball away and reposition it on rib eight or nine. (This maneuver is essential to avoid injuring the floating rib.) With your right leg extended out as long as possible on the floor and the left leg bent and left foot flat on the floor for balance, roll up the rib cage in one-half-inch increments, expanding the thorax out into the ball on each inhalation and sinking into the ball on each exhalation. You are using your inhalation to expand the intercostals from the inside out.

As you approach the axilla, extend your right arm out on the floor to elongate the latissimus dorsi, letting your head rest on your shoulder. Consciously use your breathing to create movement in the upper ribs. Roll into the center of the armpit, then down the humerus about one-third of the way toward the elbow. Rotate the hand counterclockwise until the palm faces up to stimulate the biceps. Roll about halfway to the elbow, then rotate your hand clockwise so the palm faces up again and the ball rolls into the triceps. Roll the ball onto your elbow bone, then sit up. Repeat on the left side.

### Abdominal Routine

Place the ball at the right anterior superioriliac spine (ASIS) with the leg extended out long. The toes of the right foot are on the floor, with the foot flexed. The left knee, too, is off the floor. (Alternatively, the left knee can rest on the floor for balance and support.) Pull the abdominal muscles in toward the spine and keep the lower back flat. Stay here for several seconds to stimulate the bone. The pressure from the ball sets off a release in the muscles that have attachments on this bone.

Slowly roll the ball off the bone into the abdomen. Make sure the ball stays close into the curve of the ilium. Extend the right arm overhead and the right leg out long. You will feel the connection between the abdominal muscles and the quadriceps. It is also easy to feel the insertion points of the iliacus and the psoas on the lesser trochanter.

Inhale, raise the arm and leg off the ground and stretch them both out long. Exhale and lower the arm and leg.

To go deeper into the iliacus, place the right forearm on the floor perpendicularly in front of the body. Place the left palm at shoulder level down into the floor and begin to twist the torso to the left. Keep breathing deeply, and as you exhale twist the torso farther to the left. The ball shifts toward the center of the body and the right hip falls off the ball to the right. Repeat on the left side.

### Chest Routine

Place the ball at the center of the sternum one inch above the xiphoid process. Stay here and breathe for several seconds, letting your body weight rest over the ball. Your legs and forearms also bear some weight. Let your head relax down toward the floor.

Move the ball up the sternum in micromovements, staying at each point for several breaths. When you reach the upper third of the sternum—above breast tissue for women and below the

## FOUR BASIC EXERCISES



These photos show several good basic back exercises. **Top Left:** The ball is under the ischium, releasing the hamstring, adductor magnus tendons and deep lateral rotators (except for the piriformis). **Top Right:** Rolling up the lumbar spine. **Lower Left:** Rolling up the thoracic spine with the head supported. **Lower Right:** Rolling up the cervical spine while working the shoulder down to the floor.





clavicle—extend your right arm out at shoulder level. Now microshift the ball out toward the shoulder. As the ball moves toward the shoulder, begin to twist the head and torso in the opposite direction. The movement of the ball should occur during the deepest sink as you exhale. This spreads the pectoralis major muscle outward. Keep the left hand palm down on the floor at shoulder level to help twist the body. To increase the weight bearing into the shoulder and to twist further to the left, bend both knees out to the left side.

When the ball presses into the anterior shoulder, stay for several breaths, emphasizing the twist. Then roll the ball up onto the shoulder joint. Try to drop the right side of the chest toward the floor, adding this action to the leftward twist. This further isolates the shoulder joint.

Roll the ball out along the humerus. The arm should be as close to shoulder level as possible. Continue twisting the torso to the left. Roll the ball out about halfway to the elbow, then remove it.

Sit up. With your eyes closed, breathe and feel the differences between the two sides of the chest. Sit or stand up, walk around and feel the differences, then repeat on the other side.

### Hands-On Assist For The Neck And Shoulder

Have your client do the back routine until the ball rolls into the

right side of the neck. Use one hand to traction the shoulder down to the floor and away from the head. The other hand tractions the head and neck to the left, down and around the ball. Keep the head centered while tractioning. Do not let it turn to the left.

Remove the ball and observe the differences between the two sides, then repeat on the left side. 📷

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**Below Left:** This is an abdominal routine. The exerciser is directly under the ASIS, with the abdominal muscles pulled in and lower back flat.

**Below Right:** Another abdominal routine, showing the technique for releasing the iliacus. With one forearm perpendicularly in front of the body and the other palm on the floor supporting the body, twist the torso so that one hip drops toward the floor.



**Top Left:** Chest routine. Place the ball at the center of the sternum and breathe, letting the body weight rest over the ball. **Top Right:** Another chest routine, spreading the pectoralis major out to the side toward the insertion. With the ball at the anterior shoulder, the body twists in the opposite direction, maximizing the stretch. **Bottom Left:** In this side routine, the demonstrator is rolling up the rib cage with head supported, using the inhalation to expand the intercostals from the inside out. **Bottom Right:** Side routine, with the ball at the axilla. The arm is extended along the floor, with the head resting on the shoulder. Use the breathing to create movement in the upper ribs.

