

## Spinal Decompression through suspension inversion a newly recognized fitness component gaining in popularity.

*By Christopher Harrison, Creator of AntiGravity Yoga*

We all know the benefits of cardio endurance and strength training. It's obvious the benefits of body composition management. We make heroes of those who are the best at mastering physical skill and with the recent surge in yoga we are beginning to better understand the importance of flexibility training for muscular balance and joint mobility. However, an often neglected area of fitness is gaining popularity that could not only help us to maintain good spinal health and prevent injuries, but could save ourselves visits to the chiropractor. This fitness component is **spinal decompression**.

The concept is simple. We spend most of our day compressing the vertebrae in our spines. As we age the space between the disks diminish pinching the nerves and causing pain. Inverting to a headstand only reverses the compression, often placing undo pressure on the more delicate vertebrae of the neck. Reversing gravity by hanging upside down allows the spine to fall into correct alignment. This process of realigning the vertebrae not only relieves back tension, but also improves our posture. The many positive effects of suspension inversion are accomplished without the negative effects of compression.

The 50's brought us traction tables, the 70's brought us gravity boots and the 90's brought us inversion boards. Each accomplished the job of spinal decompression but put undo stress on other joints, particularly the ankles and knees, where decompression is not necessarily desired. The preferred technique is to hang from the hips --- thus the AntiGravity Hammock.

The AntiGravity Hammock is a soft lycra fabric rated to hold a thousand pounds that hangs from the ceiling from two points at shoulder width and hip height. Through five simple, carefully guided progressions one can hang from their hips with their spine enjoying the effects of gravity's reversal in a move called "the inverted yogi". The tension against the hammock and the wrapping of the legs lock one into position so that once inverted it is impossible to fall. Coming back up to a stand is accomplished by simply reversing the progressive steps. A similar technique is also used to perform a "flying downward dog", opening up and allowing decompression for the hips. People who sit for many hours on a daily basis, bicyclists and women who walk in heels or have given birth find this to be extremely helpful to relieve pain from tightness in the hips.

It is estimated that over 40 million Americans suffer from back pain. Although sufferers should consult their physician before-hand, decompression therapy is a simple remedy that could provide relief. At the very least, hanging in the AntiGravity hammock helps one enjoy the numerous positive mental and physical health benefits of inversions.

## My Story

I was one of those kids that was always jumping around experimenting with gravity. By seventeen I was an internationally ranked competitive gymnast specializing in tumbling (before sprung floors). In college I flipped off of mini-trampolines over human pyramids in a top ranking cheer squad (onto hard basketball floors). I later transferred those skills as a Broadway acro-dancer (on raked stages) before starting my own acrobatic performance team appropriately named AntiGravity. Although I was the vision of health, the years of compression took a major toll on my joints. By 28 I had well over my share of knee surgeries and was visiting the chiropractor at least twice a week. By my late 30's, despite finding much relief from yoga, I could no longer comfortably do a headstand and I was visiting rheumatologists to get help for my back pain.

Luckily, necessity is the mother of invention. To save my team from similar injuries, I took my popular company of tumbling athletes up into the air another way, by hanging from apparatus: bungees, wires, ropes and silks. However, we were a team of gymnasts and dancers, not circus performers. We didn't know how to climb a silk so instead I looped the fabric into a hammock, brought the points in and created a cocoon. We called it the AntiGravity Hammock and it was much kinder than rope or metal bars. This was 1996. Although the concept of a hammock was not new, this particular design of a silk pouch was unique and proved to be very interesting to work within. Aside from our own original productions, with the AntiGravity Hammock, I created the Tony award winning number on Broadway for (Jane Krakowski in "Nine") and a flying number for Mariah Carey in her Charmbracelet Tour as well as numerous television award shows. Cirque du Soleil eventually adopted the apparatus for their arena show Delirium with AntiGravity performers and choreography and the AntiGravity Hammock is now a standard aerial apparatus.

While working on the apparatus, the favorite position was a simple upside down hang from the hips. During rehearsals, my athletes would just "hang out" on their breaks, each of us taking turns and noting the back relief and benefits. I loved it so much that I hung one up in my home and began a ritualistic inverted daily meditation. In no time at all, I found that I no longer needed to see my chiropractor and that my back pain disappeared. I found it to be especially handy to decompress after a long flight.

Hanging the apparatus so the bottom comes to waist height allowed for an entirely new movement vocabulary. By distributing the weight between the AntiGravity Hammock and the floor I created a plethora of conditioning, stretching and proprioceptive exercises as well. I took my combined knowledge of yoga, dance, gymnastics, aerial acrobatics, Pilates and callisthenic conditioning and created a complete workout. My decompression ritual suddenly became a fully formed fitness regime with each exercise withstanding the scrutiny of the AFAA 5 Questions™ test.

In the summer of 2007 AntiGravity played the Hammerstein Ballroom in Manhattan in a successful run of our touring show. Donna Cyrus, head of programming for Crunch

gyms saw the show and approached me about a fitness tie in. Together with Crunch we modified the technique to work for the everyday athlete and in January of 2008 we launched the new suspension program and had it approved by the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America. By October of 2008, together we expanded beyond New York to Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco & Miami.

The program was named the Best New Fitness Program by New Yorker magazine, picked up by numerous TV networks and media outlets and the rest is history. Classes are always wait-listed, Crunch continues to expand into new facilities and a new fitness craze has begun. Participants are not only very pleased with the effects but also enjoy the creativity and feeling of flying. There is a great sense of accomplishment in each group class and we can boast zero injuries so far in the first year.

The program continues to expand in gyms and yoga studios worldwide. To participate in a class, become certified or include AntiGravity Yoga in your gym or studio, visit our website [www.antigravityyoga.com](http://www.antigravityyoga.com).