受身 Ukemi – Judo breakfalls

The basic breakfalls and further variations – start, middle and end with the key points

Ukemi (受身, "receiving with the body") is the art of falling without getting hurt. Every throw ends with a fall, so Uke must master ukemi before Tori can practise throws at full speed. Good ukemi spreads the impact over a large area, protects the head and turns a fall into a controlled movement.

Five rules for every breakfall

1. **Chin on the chest** – the head never touches the mat.
2. **Round the back** – roll onto the mat instead of landing flat.
3. **Beat the mat** with the whole arm, palm down, at about 30–45° from the body – at the same moment as the back lands.
4. **Breathe out** on impact and keep the body relaxed.
5. **Keep the arms off the mat** as props – never catch a fall with a straight arm or the elbow.

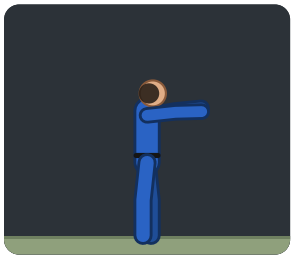
The four basic breakfalls

The Kodokan basics – learned in this order and practised at the start of every training session.

Ushiro-ukemi 後受身

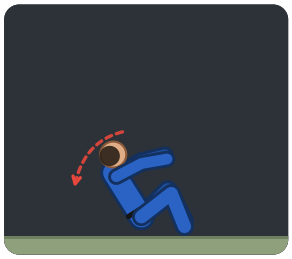
BACKWARD BREAKFALL · BACKWARDS

The first breakfall to learn. Uke sits down close to the heels, rolls back on a round back and beats the mat with both arms. Every throw in which Uke falls backwards ends with it. Why it works: sitting down close to the heels shortens the fall to a few centimetres, and the round back turns the remaining drop into a rocking roll, so the body meets the mat gradually instead of all at once. The arms strike at the moment the back lands and take a large part of the energy over their whole surface, while the tucked chin keeps the head off the mat.



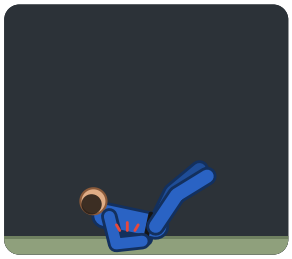
1 · START

Arms forward, chin tucked



2 · MIDDLE

Sit down close to the heels, roll back



3 · END

Both arms beat the mat, legs up

Get it right

- Look at your belt the whole time – the chin stays on the chest.
- Sit down close to your heels, then roll back over a round back.
- Beat the mat with both arms at 30–45° from the body, palms down.
- Let the legs swing up and come back – the back of the head stays in the air.

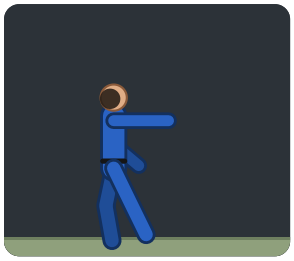
Uke needs it for

O-soto-gari · O-uchi-gari · Ko-uchi-gari · Ko-soto-gari · O-soto-guruma · Tani-otoshi

Yoko-ukemi 横受身

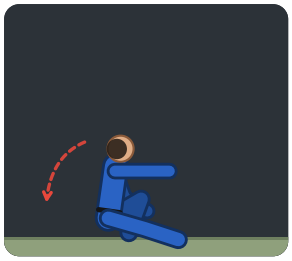
SIDE BREAKFALL · TO THE SIDE

The most common landing after throws. Uke slides one leg out to the side along the mat, sits down low over the heel of the other leg and rolls onto the side of the sliding leg. The arm on that side beats the mat. Practised to the left and right. Why it works: sitting down next to the supporting heel brings the hips almost to the mat before the actual fall, so there is hardly any height left to fall from. The body then rolls onto its side – hip, flank and shoulder – which spreads the impact over a long contact line, and the arm beating the mat takes the last of the energy.



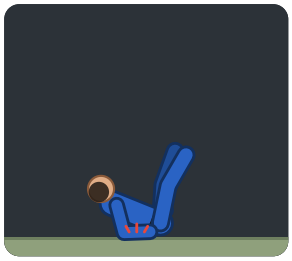
1 · START

Arm swings up, one leg slides out to the side



2 · MIDDLE

Sit down low over the supporting heel



3 · END

Roll onto the side, legs up – the arm beats the mat

Get it right

- Slide the leg out to the side along the mat and sit down low and close to the supporting heel.
- Roll onto the side of the sliding leg – hip and shoulder touch the mat, the head stays up.
- Beat the mat with the arm on the landing side, about 30–45° from the body.
- Let the legs swing up and keep them apart so the ankles don't knock together.

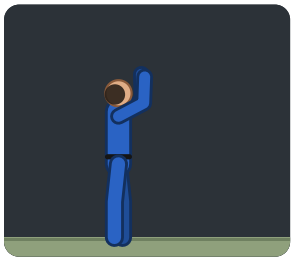
Uke needs it for

De-ashi-harai · Hiza-guruma · Sasae-tsurikomi-ashi · Uki-goshi · O-goshi · Ippon Seoi Nage · Okuri-ashi-harai · Tai-otoshi · Harai-goshi

Mae-ukemi 前受身

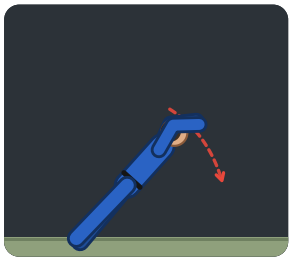
FORWARD BREAKFALL · FORWARDS

Falling straight forward onto the forearms. The body stays straight and tense, and the forearms and hands form a triangle in front of the face that takes the impact. Protects against stumbles and falls on the face. Why it works: the forearms and palms form a large, flat contact area that lands all at once, and the elbows bend slightly to brake the fall like a spring. Because the body stays straight and tense, the energy is passed evenly into the forearms and the toes instead of into the knees, chest or face.



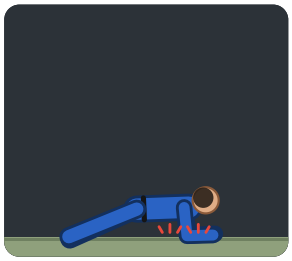
1 · START

Forearms up in front of the face



2 · MIDDLE

Fall forward with a straight body



3 · END

Land on forearms and toes, head turned

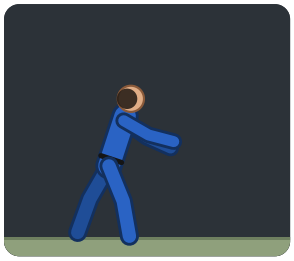
Get it right

- Bring the forearms up in front of the face, hands forming a triangle.
- Keep the body straight and tense from head to heels.
- Land on the whole forearm and palms at the same time – the elbows bend to absorb the fall.
- Turn the head to the side; only the forearms and toes touch the mat.

Zenpo-kaiten-ukemi 前方回転受身

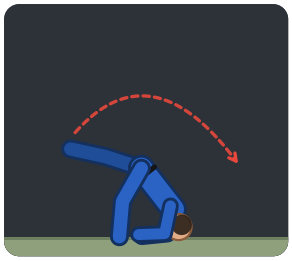
FORWARD ROLLING BREAKFALL · FORWARD ROLL

A diagonal roll from the leading hand over the shoulder and across the back to the opposite hip. It ends in yoko-ukemi or with standing up. Needed for throws that turn Uke over forwards. Why it works: instead of stopping the forward motion, the roll converts it into rotation. The curved arm and the diagonal path over the shoulder and across the back give the body a round surface to roll over, so the energy is used up gradually along the whole roll. The final slap of arm and leg takes the rest.



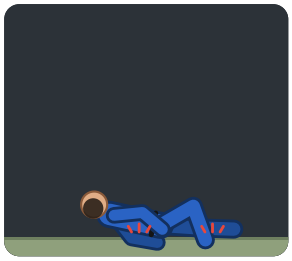
1 · START

Step forward, arm forms a circle



2 · MIDDLE

Roll diagonally over the shoulder



3 · END

Come up into a stable stance

Get it right

- Step forward with the same leg as the rolling arm and curve the arm into a circle.
- Roll from the little-finger side of the hand along the arm and over the shoulder.
- Turn the head away from the rolling arm – the head never touches the mat.
- Roll diagonally across the back to the opposite hip and come up facing forward.

Uke needs it for

Uki-otoshi · Sumi-otoshi · Kata-guruma

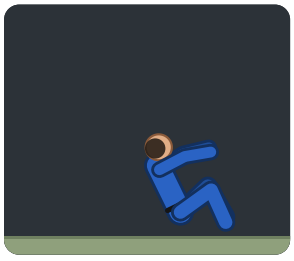
Further variations

Rolls and falls for advanced practice, and ukemi when a partner throws you.

Ushiro-kaiten-ukemi 後方回転受身

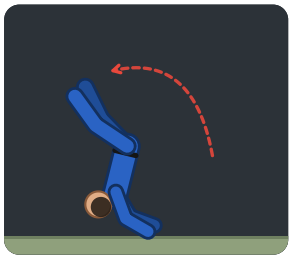
BACKWARD ROLL · BACKWARD ROLL

The continuation of ushiro-ukemi: instead of stopping on the back, Uke rolls over one shoulder and comes back to the knees or feet. Useful to get out of a backward fall and stand up quickly. Why it works: the backward momentum is not stopped on the back but carried on into a roll. Going over one shoulder (not the neck) keeps the spine safe, and the small, tucked body rolls through quickly, so Uke ends up on the knees with the energy used up in the rotation.



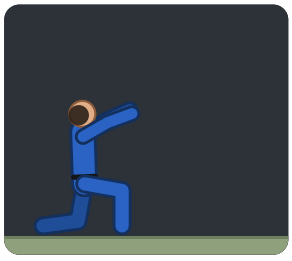
1 · START

Crouch with arms forward



2 · MIDDLE

Roll back over one shoulder



3 · END

Come up on one knee, facing forward

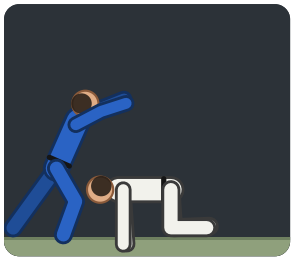
Get it right

- Start low and round, chin on the chest.
- Turn the head to one side and roll over the opposite shoulder, not over the neck.
- Pull the knees in close so the roll stays small and fast.
- Land on the knee and foot and come up facing your partner again.

Zenpo-tobi-ukemi 前方飛び受身

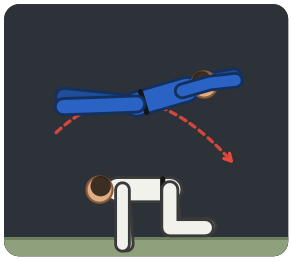
FLYING FORWARD ROLL · FORWARD, AIRBORNE

A diving zenpo-kaiten-ukemi over a partner or an obstacle. It trains the confidence to fall from a height, as in high throws like uchi-mata or harai-goshi. Only for judoka who roll cleanly on the ground. Why it works: the higher and longer the flight, the more energy there is – the rolling arm touches down far ahead and turns the downward speed into forward rotation. The longer the roll, the more gently the energy is spread out. That's why a clean ground roll is the precondition.



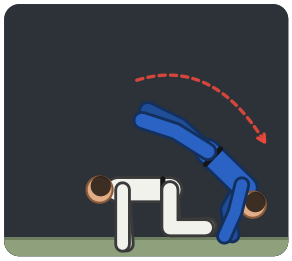
1 · START

Run up and take off



2 · MIDDLE

Dive over the obstacle, arm leads



3 · END

Landing: the right arm touches down first, head tucked

Get it right

- Learn it step by step: first a low obstacle, then higher and longer.
- Lead with the rolling arm in a curve – reach long, not down.
- Touch down far beyond the obstacle and roll diagonally over the shoulder.
- Keep the body tucked in the roll and come up in one movement.

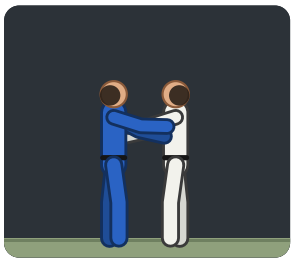
Uke needs it for

Uchi-mata · Hane-goshi · Harai-goshi

Nage-komi ukemi 投込受身

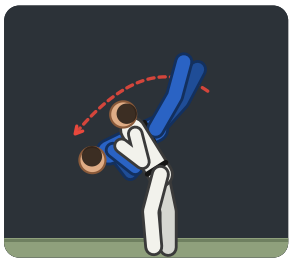
UKEMI WHEN THROWN · FROM A THROW

The real test of ukemi: Tori throws, Uke lands. The pictures show O-goshi from ai-yotsu (both right-handed). Tori keeps hold of Uke's sleeve until Uke has landed and guides the fall; Uke beats the mat with the free arm. Practise each throw slowly at first and choose the ukemi it calls for – e.g. ushiro-ukemi for O-soto-gari, yoko-ukemi for O-goshi or Ippon Seoi Nage. Why it works: a throw adds speed and rotation that Uke cannot control alone. Tori's pull on the sleeve slows the fall and keeps Uke's upper body off the mat, and Uke's slap at the moment of landing takes the remaining energy – both together make hard throws safe to practise.



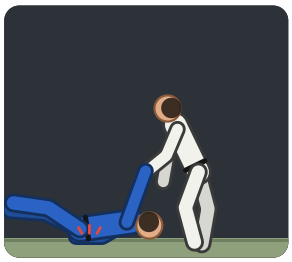
1 · START

Ai-yotsu kumikata – both judoka grip right-handed



2 · MIDDLE

O-goshi: Uke goes over Tori's hip, chin tucked



3 · END

Uke beats the mat, Tori holds Uke's arm

Get it right

- Hold on to Tori's sleeve with the gripping hand; beat the mat with the free arm.
- Tuck the chin as soon as the throw starts – before you leave the ground.
- Go with the throw instead of blocking it with a straight arm or a stiff leg.
- Tori keeps the sleeve until Uke has landed, so Uke can't land on the head or shoulder.

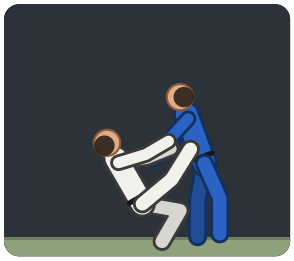
Uke needs it for

O-soto-gari · Ippon Seoi Nage · O-goshi

Sutemi-waza ukemi 捨身技の受身

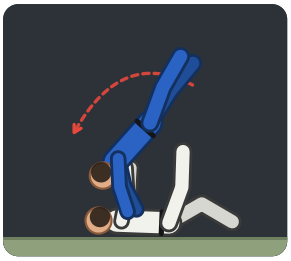
UKEMI FOR SACRIFICE THROWS · OVER TORI

In sacrifice throws Tori falls first and Uke flies over Tori's body, often head first. Uke needs a clean forward roll: tuck, turn over the shoulder and land in yoko- or ushiro-ukemi, well clear of Tori. Why it works: Uke is thrown head first over Tori, so the fall must turn into a roll. Tucking the chin and turning over the shoulder lets the rotation carry Uke through to the back, and the slap of arm and leg on landing takes the last of the energy, well clear of Tori.



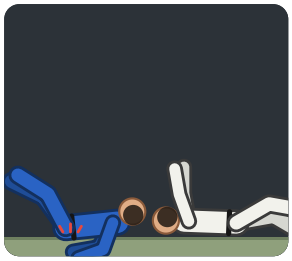
1 · START

Tori drops, foot in Uke's belly



2 · MIDDLE

Uke flies over, chin tucked



3 · END

Uke lands on the back beyond Tori

Get it right

- Tuck the chin and round the back as soon as Tori drops.
- Turn over the shoulder – never dive straight onto the head.
- Beat the mat on landing and keep the legs away from Tori.
- Practise first from a kneeling position, then from standing.

Uke needs it for

Tomoe-nage · Sumi-gaeshi · Ura-nage · Yoko-guruma · Uki-waza

How ukemi is taught – from low to high

1. **Lying** on the back – rock and beat the mat.
2. **Sitting** with straight legs – roll back and beat the mat.
3. **Squatting** (sonkyo) – sit down close to the heels and roll.
4. **Standing** – from a still, upright position.
5. **Moving** – walking forwards, backwards and sideways, then falling.
6. **Over a partner or obstacle** – and finally when thrown (nage-komi).

Safety for teaching

- Start every session with a few minutes of ukemi – even with advanced judoka.
- Move on to the next level only when the current one is clean on both sides.
- Children and beginners learn throws only once ushiro- and yoko-ukemi are automatic.
- Use soft mats and enough space; for flying rolls add a crash mat.