

Yoga Shouldn't Hurt

How to avoid injuries in practice.

by Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Most yoga injuries in otherwise healthy individuals are both predictable and avoidable. Yoga practice brings out the traits – be it impatience, imbalance, ego, or the need to please others – that wreak havoc in other areas of life. Our yoga practice is one more place we express these traits, which can lead to injury. Fortunately, our practice is also the one place we can see these traits clearly and learn to transform them.

Let's take a look at three typical yoga injuries that can occur in people of any age or fitness level. For each injury, we can see that how we are doing our yoga is the source of injury, not the yoga itself.

Chronic inflammation of the hamstrings or hips.

These injuries are caused by excessive or aggressive forward bending and refusing to take appropriate rest.

When you stretch beyond your comfortable limits, you can create microtears in muscle and connective tissue, and the repair process can lead to swelling, pain and nerve

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irritation. Most people who experience this kind of injury will try to fix it with the same attitude that led them to it – more intense forward bending. But this type of injury is a clear signal to rest or practice other poses. It is not an injury you can work through by practicing more of the same, even with better form. Trying to heal an overuse injury with better form is like trying to cure a hangover by drinking

more expensive liquor.

To avoid this injury, make sure your practice is well-rounded and includes days of rest. Listen to the signals of discomfort you experience in a pose or after a practice. Don't let impatience, ego, a sense of competing with other students, or the desire to please your teacher convince you to push through pain.

Inflammation or compression in the shoulder joint.

This kind of injury (such as rotator cuff tendonitis) will cause pain in many shoulder movements, particularly lifting the arms. It may be caused by repetitive stress, such as endless cycles of sun salutations (done with or without good form). This again points to the simple fact that just because yoga is good for you, doesn't mean that an insane amount of yoga is insanely good for you. Overdoing it will reverse the benefit of any action, no matter how skillful and well-intentioned.

Shoulder injuries can also be caused by trying to follow overly restrictive or simplistic alignment cues (such as “keep your shoulder blades down” in poses that require some scapular elevation, such as warrior I). This highlights how a seemingly positive trait – the desire to do the pose right and learn from the teacher – can backfire. No matter how good an alignment rule may be, I have yet to meet a



Photo: Phyllis Christopher

rule that applies to all people or to all poses. If you try a pose in a new way, and it hurts, then it's not a skillful action to repeat it, no matter what your teacher says. You are the only one who is getting sensory feedback from your body, and you need to please the teacher within first.

Strain to the ligaments of the knee.

These types of injuries, whose symptoms include both instability and pain around the knee, are most likely caused by practicing advanced poses (such as half lotus) before the body is ready for them, or by pushing further in poses than the body is ready for. It's easy to look at the goal of the final pose and plough ahead, ignoring the soft whisper of the body's resistance. In yoga, like other areas of life, each warning will be louder than the last – and you don't want the signal that finally gets your attention to be the scream you make when a ligament tears. In poses like half lotus, pigeon, or hero, don't focus on the external signposts of doing a pose well. If your inner critic or competitor insists on monitoring something, assign it the role of evaluating how well you honor your inner experience of a pose.

If you find yourself injured from your yoga practice, don't despair. Many yoga teachers will share the story of how their first yoga injury transformed their practice from one of ego to one of self-compassion. The body and spirit have an amazing ability to heal, and when practiced from a place of awareness and non-ego, yoga is a powerfully healing tool.

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Kelly McGonigal, PhD, teaches yoga and psychology at Stanford University. She is the Editor in Chief of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy.