

Body & Soul

BALANCED LIVING IN A BUSY WORLD

HOW TO PREVENT YOGA INJURIES

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bent out of shape

Is your practice causing pain and strains? Here's how to stay healthy and off the injured list. **BY ALANNA FINCKE**

hOLLY MILLEA, A 41-YEAR-OLD FREELANCE writer living in New York City, was in enviable shape. The petite, 108-pound runner had the body fat of a triathlete and had practically never been sick. Two years ago, she started a vigorous Ashtanga yoga practice. Then, last August, she began to feel numbness and tingling down her left arm and into her first three fingers. The pain intensified, interfering with her ability to lie or sleep on her left side. At one point, she thought it was her heart, or even multiple sclerosis, which has affected several family members.

Now, one emergency room visit and two MRIs later, Millea has a diagnosis: a bulging disk in her cervical spine, which is causing an impingement to the root of a nerve in her neck. If the numbness doesn't go away in a couple of months, her doctor wants to surgically remove the disk and fuse two ver-

tebrae together. "I am sure this is yoga-related," says Millea. "It's at the base of my neck, and I was doing Shoulder Stand a lot. I was doing it wrong, and I was pushing myself too hard."

With more than 18 million Americans now doing yoga, and many of them new to the practice, it is more important than ever to understand how to do the poses safely. While not everyone who practices yoga will suffer an injury like Millea's, problems do occur—usually when someone is not strong enough or flexible enough to do a pose, or when an existing injury or weakness is made worse by doing certain poses. What's more, we tend to practice yoga in ways that are anything but gentle. When we bring our competitive drive to class, we may push ourselves far beyond our capabilities. "People have a predeter-

TAKE IT EASY: KNOWING YOUR LIMITS WILL SAVE YOUR JOINTS.

mined idea of what a pose should look like," says Power Yoga creator Bryan Kest, who is

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based in Los Angeles. "In Forward Bend, instead of allowing it to be what it is, people are trying to get their head to their knee—so they rip their hamstrings. We all have to be open to finding our place in each pose. The poses aren't generic."

According to Robert Stanton, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon and member of the clinical faculty at the Yale School of Medicine, the most common yoga injuries hit the major joints—wrists, knees, neck, shoulders, hips, and lower back. Take the neck, for example: Plow, Shoulder Stand, and Headstand pose the greatest risk. These advanced poses are easy to do incorrectly, placing too much pressure on the neck. In Plow and Shoulder Stand, Kest recommends putting a blanket under the shoulders to relieve pressure on the neck. (See Featured Pose, page 46.) In Headstand, you should be able to lift your head off the floor, which means your arms, not your neck, are supporting your body weight. In addition, the lower back can pay the price when Forward Bend is done incorrectly. Be sure to generate the movement from the hips and pelvis, not by pushing and pulling on your spine. And if you have bad knees, do not force yourself into Lotus position, and sit on a block (or two) in Hero's pose.

Overstretching is another yoga hazard. "If you stretch too hard, your muscles will contract," says Josef Della-Grotte, a muscular therapist and Feldenkrais practitioner at the Body Mind Integration Center in Watertown, Massachusetts. "Go slowly, and think of lengthening, not stretching." Kest agrees: "Less is better than more. If you do less, you'll never hurt yourself, and you can show up for class the next day."

In general, the yoga teachers, chiropractors, orthopedic surgeons, and others in the health profession that we spoke to said that all injuries happen for the same reason: because of insensitivity or lack of gentleness in your practice.

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"You can have sloppy form, but if you're gentle and listening to your body, you'll never hurt yourself," says Kest. "And you can have the best form, but if you're violent, you will hurt yourself."

That advice rings true for Millea, albeit too late. "I am super athletic, and I thought I could do anything," she says. "But I took it too quickly. I still needed to take baby steps."

Here are tips for developing a safe and healthy yoga practice.

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE It sounds simple, but for many of us, it is the hardest thing to do. We want to jump into the Power Yoga class and sweat until we drop. But proceeding slowly and working at your own level are critical. "Injury occurs when you do a posture that you are clearly not strong enough, flexible enough, or qualified to do," says Craig Martin, a chiropractor and homeopath in New York City, who has treated

patients with yoga-related injuries. "It's just like going out to run 10 miles without working up to it." Going slowly means taking beginner classes until you have a basic understanding of the poses and how your body moves in space. And don't be afraid to use props, such as blocks, blankets, and straps. They are there so that you can do poses with strength and integrity.

LET GO OF STRIVING FOR FLEXIBILITY "Yoga is about releasing tension and increasing circulation. It is not about being flexible," says Kest, who reminds us that in India the physical practice of yoga is only a small part of the system, which includes study, meditation, and diet—in short, a whole way of life. "Ultimately, yoga is about loving yourself, balancing your body, and healing," he adds.

REMEMBER: YOGA IS EXERCISE As with any form of exercise, says Stanton, you should follow the basic rules when prac-

featured pose

Shoulder Stand

This pose is one of the most misunderstood among yoga practitioners. It is an advanced pose for someone whose abdominal muscles are strong and, more important, who is open through his or her shoulder girdle and thoracic (upper) spine. It can take a long time to develop the shoulder openness needed to do this pose correctly, since many of us suffer from bad posture (rounded shoulders). "Honor your boundaries," says Kest. "Listen to what you're feeling in your body and work with that, rather than working with the way you think the pose is supposed to be." Here Kest explains how to come into the pose safely and properly, once you have the strength, an understanding of your body, and the proper guidance from a qualified instructor.

Gently and slowly come into Plow, supporting your lower back with your hands (Figure 1). From Plow, keeping the palms on the lower back, raise your right leg up to the sky. If it feels comfortable and safe, bring your left leg up as well. If you feel discomfort, try putting more weight on your arms and shoulders and less weight on the neck. (If you're still uncomfortable, get out of the pose, slowly.) While reaching both legs gently away from the hips, keep ankles together, legs activated, and the neck aligned (Figure 2). Hold the pose, like others, for as long as your breath can remain deep and free. Try starting out with 6–8 breaths, but if your breath becomes erratic or feels strained, come out of the pose. To exit the pose, lower to Plow, then roll down vertebrae by vertebrae, slowly. **Modification:** If you experience neck pain, put a little padding, such as a blanket, under the neck and shoulders.

Done safely, Shoulder Stand can help reverse the normal effects of one of the greatest stressors in our lives: gravity. Enjoy it from this perspective!



ticing yoga: Do a proper warm-up, learn the appropriate techniques, build up your strength, and listen to your body.

UNDERSTAND THE ANATOMY OF MOVEMENT Knowing how the poses work different parts of the body can help you avoid injury. DellaGrotte has worked with hundreds of people who have stopped doing yoga because of pain and discomfort and has gotten them back on the mat after explaining the principles of human movement. "I teach my students that the body moves in six directions, following the dictates of physics and gravity: extending, as in sun salutation; flexing, as in forward bend; rotating right and left, as in spinal twist; or side bending right and left. I just change the window of perception."

KNOW YOUR YOGI Practicing with a qualified instructor is another key to avoiding getting hurt. "You can't trust your body with a yoga teacher who has just graduated from a two-day training course," says Kest, referring to programs such as YogaFit. "Yoga is something that you

learn over years of practice and study." Don't be afraid to ask your teacher how he or she was trained. Call the studio ahead of time and find out what kind of yoga is practiced and what kind of training is required of its teachers.

BE AWARE OF PREVIOUS INJURY OR WEAKNESS Just because the instructor may be teaching a pose doesn't mean you have to do it. If you know you have tight shoulders, for instance, you might want to avoid Shoulder Stand. When you need a break or don't want to do the pose being taught, get into Child's pose. Good teachers like it when their students know themselves well enough not to do a pose. No teacher wants a student to be injured in class.

Ultimately, yoga is an extremely safe and wonderful form of exercise that will make you healthy and strong in both mind and body. In fact, many physicians encourage people to do yoga. "I think it is a valuable technique," says Stanton. "I've only seen minor injuries such as muscle strains on and off over

the years." And even after a yoga injury, don't discount the entire practice; instead, lighten up. After all, yoga is about cultivating compassion. As Martin says, "I am always encouraging people to get back on the mat." +

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send us your yoga questions!

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