

## How to Practice Yoga Without Wrecking Your Body

*By Lee Albert NMT*

A recent NY Times article (How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body) is warning us about the dangers of yoga. There are a number of good points in the article about inversions and stretching too deeply into postures. The article goes on to describe various injuries many people suffer while practicing yoga. This even includes some quite accomplished yogis. The article concludes that the vast majority of people should give up yoga altogether.

While I agree with much of what is said in the article, I have come to a much different conclusion. I believe yoga to be safe and beneficial for most people. What is needed is a little bit more knowledge and a smaller ego.

As a Neuromuscular Therapist and a yoga teacher, I know that muscles work best in their mid range and not their end range. It is most beneficial to stretch those muscles in the mid range. This means not going too deep into a posture. The typical instruction in a yoga class is to “go a little deeper” or “feel the edge”. When I teach a yoga class I tell my students to keep at least 25% in the tank. In other words, do not go to the edge and do not push too deeply.

Ironically by lessening the stretch you will usually get a better result and avoid a lot of injuries. This will lengthen the muscle in the mid range and the muscle will respond more readily. Muscles want to be invited to open not forced.

This is often difficult for people to do especially in this country, because we are taught more is better. Now I do believe this is true of chocolate but not stretching. People are usually trying to stretch deeper, and this is typically just ego. People have told me, they want to look like the teacher, they want to bend over and touch the floor without bending their knees or they want to be able to perform a particular pose. The list goes on.

I studied yoga under Swami Satchidananda in the early 90's, and I remember his wise words even to this day. He said the only reason to practice the postures is to bring the body into balance. Bringing the body into balance eliminates a lot of pain and thus you could sit comfortably in meditation and find God. He said it is very difficult to meditate if you are in pain. He also said there is very little chance you can find God by standing on your head.

In my opinion, this brings us then to the main reason why so many people are getting hurt in yoga. **They are stretching the wrong muscles.** I tell my students that every yoga posture has some value but not every posture will be beneficial for your condition. Some postures will make your condition worse, and some will make it better. The trick is to know which ones are best for you.

Let's take a little trip together. The place is India. The time is 3,000 years ago. You wake up on sunny, hot morning and you have a sore back and a stiff neck. You make a visit to the Ayurvedic doctor and tell him your complaints. The doctor looks you over and tells you to go home and do three postures. He did not tell you to go home and do yoga. There are way too many postures, and you will probably pick the wrong ones and potentially make yourself worse. So you see each posture that the doctor told you to do was a prescription for your particular condition. Doing just what the doctor told you would probably make your pain go away. Then of course, you could get back to that all important task of meditating and finding God.

So now you ask how can I figure out which postures are suitable for me and which ones will harm me. Fortunately the answer to that is fairly straightforward. I have practiced as a Neuromuscular therapist for 25 years, and whether the pain is in your foot, your head or anywhere in between the common element that causes that pain is muscle imbalances. This simply means that some of your muscles are too short and tight and are pulling you out of alignment, and some of your muscles are too long and tight (like an over stretched rubber band) and are pulling you out of alignment.

90% of the time that I have treated someone for a yoga injury it is because they were stretching a muscle that was too long already. Almost everybody makes the same mistake in yoga. They assume that if a muscle is tight it must be too short. Many muscles work in pairs which means that if one is too short the opposite muscle must be too long. For example, a very common muscle imbalance is that many people have their shoulders rounded forward and a little hump in their upper back. This condition means that the muscles in the chest are too short and tight, pulling the shoulders forward and the muscles in the upper back are too long and tight often causing a sensation of tightness or pain.

The tricky part is that the muscles that are too long often times feel tighter than the muscles that are too short. Because they feel so tight, people will try to stretch that area in the upper back. When they do so it will feel good at the time because they are bringing more blood and oxygen to the area, but in the long run, it will make their shoulders round forward even more and make their muscles in the upper back even longer and tighter (think of that overstretched rubber band again).

If you want to get the maximum benefit out of your yoga practice and not injure yourself, it is imperative that you only stretch the muscles that are too short. In order to do that, we need to know which muscles those are. When your muscles come back into balance then you can add in the other postures.

Fortunately most people have the same muscle, imbalances (too long & too short) because we all do similar things like sit in a car or at a computer. In general muscles on the front of the body are too short and muscles on the back of the body are too long. Remember that those muscles that are too long most often feel much tighter than the short ones.

I have been practicing yoga for 20 years and I have observed that most yoga classes emphasize front folds and hip openers. In general, front folds stretch muscles on the back side of the body and hip openers stretch muscles on the inside of the thigh. I believe this is so common because these muscles often are

palpably tight. As I mentioned before these muscles are usually too long in most people. It will often feel good when they are being stretched, but in the long run this can lead to the muscle being even more over stretched and tighter. This can lead to possible injury.

To sum up, I believe yoga to be not only safe but particularly beneficial when practiced with a few basic guidelines:

- Warm up the muscles before stretching.
- Park your ego at the door and practice with a more mindful intention. Do not stretch more than 75% of what you think you are capable of stretching.
- Do not struggle in a posture. Yoga should not be painful. Make appropriate use of props to support yourself.
- Limit front folds and hip openers until your muscles come back into balance.
- Add a few more back bends and twists, which often target the muscles that are too short.
- Use your breath to ease into the posture.
- Hold each posture at least a minute.

If you would like to find out more about how to practice yoga without “wrecking your body”, I will be teaching a weekend yoga workshop at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health June 1-3, 2012. The class is called “Structural Yoga Remedies”.

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