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Ask a Yoga Therapist

What is the Psoas?



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Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: Dear Matt, my chiropractor told me I have a "tight psoas muscle". What are some great psoas relaxing exercises and where can I find more information about the psoas in general? ...Molly Sue German

A: Ah, the mysterious Mr/Ms Psoas...muscle of intrigue and mystery with its funny spelling and pronunciation (the "p" is silent). A good publicist indeed! Your question is a good one and like all good questions, points to better questions.

Presuming by 'tight' your doctor means that the muscle(s) are shorter than the natural resting length of the muscle, then a good yoga therapist would ask, "Why is it short?" before "How do I 'fix' it?" See the subtle mechanistic trap of fixing the 'bad' part already? Be careful, students of Yoga and Yoga therapist are unique at this juncture. Every other service provider will start with the how without digging into the 'why'. You want to know why because you understand the physical presentation points you toward a deeper understanding of yourself. So why might they be short?

1. The psoas is a deep postural muscle running from the transverse processes of the upper lumbar vertebrae to the lesser trochanter on the inside of the upper femur (thigh bone). Lying close to the bones and the center of the body and its center of gravity, small changes in length exert relatively large postural changes. So its hard to get to, causes big changes and is hard to pronounce. Add to that as a primal mover it is intimately involved in postural responses to stress and emotions and you have a star of books and workshops galore. If you are startled or under attack, one of two basic responses is to curl up to protect yourself and the vulnerable front of your body...the psoas pulls your knees up to protect your abdomen and genitals...doesn't get much more primal than that!
2. These reactions can happen in a more gentle gradation of shortening with a more insidious stress/fear response of day to day stress and life. Held a little short for long periods of time arches the low back, throws the head forward and pronates your feet, just to mention a few beauty enhancements. So is (not so -as) the shortening because the muscle is 'bad' or should the student be asking, "why the fear response?" Western care says stretch, release, mash, strengthen the faulty tissue. Yoga asks "Why?" What is the avidya or illusion that the student is living by that evokes the emotion that generates the shortening?
3. Careful observes of 'tight' psoases might also note that the muscles on their upper most ends blend into and share function with the diaphragm. We all know that the diaphragm is a mirror of the state of the mind...tense mind, tense diaphragm, ...you got it...tense psoas. So do we also have to 'fix' the diaphragm too, or should we dig deeper and ask what the story is in the mind/spirit of the student is that generates the visible physical response? If it's Yoga you want to practice, then you want to choose the latter first.

Hopefully by now you have the point...don't blame the messenger whether it's the psoas or the pinky toe...look deeper. Coupled with that looking deeper there are many techniques that can facilitate understanding at a deeper level. They are not, however the gate way to enlightenment the purveyors of particular workshops and books might have you think they are after studying their work. Some useful resources include:

The Psoas Book by Liz Koch www.coreawareness.com

Relax and Renew by Judith Lasater (the hip openers)

Somatics by Thomas Hannah (the basic postural responses with good lessons)

In your practice, maintaining good support with your feet, sitsbones, etc as appropriate roots you in your practice, giving you the literal feel of connection to offset the avidya that fuels the fear response. Structural supports such as arch supports, blocks for alignment and belts in partner assisted poses are also useful adjuncts for softening the tension in your hips and allow the psoas to resume its full and natural length.

And most of all...surrender to savasana and listen in the quiet...why all the busyness and fixing...exhale, surrender and move forward from the realization that you are part of something much bigger and you have an important role or sound to contribute in this symphony of Life we find ourselves in. Let peel that sound from firm feet, open hips and an open heart. We need to hear from you!

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