Loren Fishman has been doing yoga everyday for the past 40 years. Only once, twelve years ago, after tearing his rotator cuff while swerving his car from an oncoming taxi, did he take a break. The tear went clean through, requiring surgery and the pain was so unbearable, he couldn’t lift his arm to shoulder-height.

But after a few weeks, Fishman missed doing yoga so much, he decided to grit his teeth through a headstand. His wife walked in, saw her injured husband on his head, and demanded he stand up. When he did, the pain was gone. It never came back. Fishman, who is assistant clinical professor of rehabilitation medicine at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons and has a private practice in Manhattan, couldn’t believe what had happened.

He didn’t magically heal his rotator cuff. But on that day, twelve years ago, he discovered what has led him to use yoga as a treatment for rotator cuff injuries in more than 1,000 patients.

Beyond using yoga to treat shoulder injuries, Fishman wants people to understand how critical the movements of the shoulder are in avoiding injury in asana practice. On Thursday, Nov. 1, he
will lead a workshop at ISHTA with yoga therapist Cathy Lilly called “Yoga and the Shoulder” to help educate yogis on what’s happening in that part of the body when they practice.

“The shoulder is involved in almost every yoga pose,” Fishman says. “The shoulder blade roams all over the back of the ribs. Because of that, the muscles have an extremely important role in fixing the shoulder blade and holding it still.”

Often injuries in yoga are situated around the shoulder, says Fishman, involving a tear in the rotator cuff, a group of four muscles and their tendons that connect the shoulder blade to the head of the upper arm bone and act as a stabilizer. Shoulder injuries can happen to any yogi—from students with stooped shoulders to muscular students who don’t have enough range of motion to bendy yogis who push too far and tear a ligament or tendon.

The problem often stems from students fixing their shoulders in a way that’s consistent with their posture, says Fishman, not realizing that their posture is bad. When someone doesn’t properly align the torso and shoulders—which is all too easy to do—one either over-compensates by using structural elements of the shoulder or puts muscles at a mechanical disadvantage—both of which can result in tearing.

_Chaturanga_ is one of the most common ways Fishman sees yogis injure their shoulders—either placing their arms too far forward, back or off to the sides, making it very hard for the muscles to leverage the weight of the body. Fishman also sees injuries happening in a handful of other asanas from crow pose to wheel and side plank.

Even in downward facing dog, students can hurt themselves by over-extending their arms and allowing their chest to sink too far down, says Fishman, injuring the latissimus dorsi and pectorals.

But while so much talk about the dangers of asana have been circulating in the yoga world these days, Fishman also believes yoga can help heal injuries. And while many yogis are against teaching headstand to their students for fear of neck injury, Fishman swears by it as a way to recover from shoulder issues because it prompts the subscapularis—a muscle that runs along the undersurface of the shoulder blade—to kick in for the supraspinatus, the most commonly torn rotator cuff muscle.

Other treatments he uses on patients include the **triangular forearm support**, which involves clasping the hands and pressing the forearms into the wall while bending and lunging into one foot; or doing a headstand with the knees on a chair. In his experience, nine out of ten patients with rotator cuff injuries feel relief and regain their mobility after doing one of these poses.

But it’s not just headstand and its variations that Fishman has found to be healthy for the shoulder. Poses like locust and gate strengthen and improve range of motion and muscle coordination in the shoulder; squat pose improves truncal-scapular coordination, balance and alignment; _parsvottanasana_ increases shoulder mobility and helps avoid slouching, and Warrior II strengthens the lateral deltoïds and increases scapular muscular awareness and coordination.
Educating students about how their bodies feel and how that feeling correlates to healthy shoulder alignment is important for having a healthy practice, says Fishman. “We know what we see but we don’t know what we feel very much of the time,” he says. As to the dangers of hurting oneself during yoga: “I’m sure there are many more people helped by yoga than hurt by it,” Fishman says. To this day, he never misses a day of his own practice.

--by Jane Porter

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