

Pigeon Pose: Enemy Or Friend? Do It Wrong And You Could Blow Out A Knee

[Kristin Leal](#) used to teach pigeon pose every yoga class. Then she began dissecting cadavers. “I started to notice the spectrum of individuality,” Leal says as she unzips a large red bag in the back of a Manhattan café, and pulls out one, two, three human femur bones and lays them beside her.

Each bone is indeed different. The head of each femur -- the part of the bone that sits inside the hip socket -- slants at varying angles on each specimen. It’s that angle that can determine whether a student has the proper range of motion to even get into pigeon in the first place – not to mention the added limitation of tight muscles. “When you start to notice the individuality of your students, there can no longer be this quick calling out of pigeon,” says Leal, who teaches at [ISHTA Yoga](#) and [New York Yoga](#).

What's the danger?

“Pigeon hits the tightness of the hips against the pressure of the floor and if the hip joint can’t open, the pressure goes into the knee,” says [Ellen Saltonstall](#), who teaches yoga out of her private studio in Manhattan. The result is damage to the knee, which over time can lead to more severe injury.

Take, for example, Naomi Harris. In 2008, Harris, who was 33, was taking up to five yoga classes a week. She considered herself strong and advancing in her practice. Then, one day, six months into her practice, she felt her knee buckle slightly after a class. The next day, it happened a few more times and by the end of the week, she couldn’t put any weight on it without the support of crutches. When she told her surgeon the only exercise she’d been doing was yoga, he took one look at her x-rays and told her pigeon had likely been the culprit for her torn meniscus.

Harris is not the only person to experience this kind of knee trauma. “I see a fair amount of knee injuries happening,” says [Amy Matthew](#), [Body-Mind Centering](#) teacher and director of education at [The Breathing Project](#). “To be in pigeon pose without any support, without any props, requires a substantial range of motion in both hip joints because one leg is forward and one leg is back.”

When the necessary range of motion is unavailable in the hips – the force of gravity pushing down on your body transfers that weight into your knee, which overtime can do damage to the ligaments surrounding the knee joint and the meniscus -- a cushion of padding that acts as a

shock absorber in the knee. “A lot of people ignore discomfort in their knees until it becomes really serious pain,” says Matthews.

That's what happened to Harris, who needed to have a third of her meniscus cut out. But this is not a call to ban pigeon – a pose beloved by many --from all yoga classes. The pose certainly has its benefits. In particular, pigeon stretches all the gluteal muscles on the front leg while simultaneously stretching the psoas of the back leg, which can help with lower back pain, says Saltonstall.

But because of the vulnerability of the knee in this pose, it's important to understand what's happening in the body when going into it and how to avoid injury. Before teaching pigeon in a class, which Saltonstall does often, she has students work on the different elements of the pose one at a time to prepare the body. Because pigeon requires external rotation of the front leg, she has students come into goddess pose to warm up their adductors and likes to also incorporate ankle to knee, done lying down against the wall. To prepare the back leg for extension – which in pigeon, is essentially the back leg of a split – she brings students into a lunge facing the wall.

Even with preparation, once students are in the pose, many of them will need padding under their hip to bridge the gap between their pelvis and the floor. If you think you're the type who doesn't need padding under the thigh, try turning the pose on its side to gauge your range of motion, suggests Leal.

Stand facing the wall and bend one knee, rotating the hip open and placing the shin and thigh against the wall -- a vertical simulation of the pose. You'll likely have a hard time getting your pelvis to touch the wall, says Leal, yet when you're in pigeon on the floor, that's essentially what you're doing. The difference is that rather than controlling how much pressure you exert on your leg, “you're asking gravity and will to push you down,” says Leal. And this is where the danger to your knee comes in.

That's why it's important not to dismiss a teacher's suggestion to place a blanket under your thigh to add support during the pose. Rather than sinking into the pose, try keeping your lower limbs active to resist too much pressure in the joints, suggests Matthews. “More important than getting down low is feeling all of the lower limbs equally engaged so that it's not about what any one joint is doing,” she says. “We want the force and pressure to travel through the joints all the way to the feet.”

--by Jane Porter

<http://www.yogacitynyc.com/articles/WeeklyDetails/695>