

Iyengar Yoga and Back Pain by Melissa Perehudoff

Low back pain is one of the most common reasons to visit a physician, physical therapist or chiropractor. Although initially it may be necessary to rest the area of pain, a daily regimen of self-care through Iyengar yoga can help to develop awareness and neuromuscular coordination to perform the poses in a way that corrects imbalances. This increased awareness of healthy posture and body movement patterns can then be transferred into daily activities to break life-long habits that contribute to muscular imbalances and dis “ease” in the body. Ultimately Iyengar yoga can correct underlying physical malfunctions that contribute to the mechanical causes of low back pain.

The Iyengar principles of sequencing, timing and intricacy differentiate Iyengar yoga from other methods of yoga. Sequencing refers to the intentional progression of postures selected by the teacher to target a specific group of muscles, or the actions within the sequence of poses. Instructions for a specific pose are sequenced to engage various muscle groups to achieve the correct alignment and movement in the pose. Timing refers to the length of time a pose is held whether the teacher is focusing on developing mobility, stability, strength, flexibility or postural alignment. Intricacy refers to the simultaneous contractions and sometimes opposing actions that must occur in a pose for optimal alignment. For example, in Tadasana, (Mountain pose), students are asked to simultaneously move their front thighs back, tailbone in and outer thighs inward to create proper alignment of the pelvis and the femur heads in the hip sockets. Instructions become more “intricate” as the students develop their concentration and mind-body connection in following these instructions

With time, practice and patience, the yoga postures can re-educate all the muscles of the body that are contributing to aggravation of the lower back. These can include the muscles that attach to or influence the pelvic girdle, including muscles of the abdomen, diaphragm, hamstrings, quadriceps, hip adductors, lateral rotators, buttocks and muscles of the lumbar and thoracic areas of the back. The yoga postures can retrain balanced mobility in the spine, lengthen and widen constricted or stiff muscles, strengthen muscles that are underused and stabilize hypermobile or hyperflexible areas.

Students learn the difference between “healthy discomfort” in which tight muscles are lengthening and joints are creating space and “unhealthy pain” in which muscles are being pulled too aggressively or in a structurally incorrect way. With practice and increased internal awareness students learn if the effects of a pose are soothing or aggravating, which muscles and joints are tight and which side of the body is performing correctly or incorrectly.

Initially practice of the poses will address gross or superficial layers of imbalance or misalignment. Then more challenging poses are introduced that affect deeper or more subtle misalignments. Repetition of the poses and correction from the yoga teacher adds to students’ understanding of imbalances in their own bodies and teaches the students how to correctly align and work their musculoskeletal system. The healing of musculoskeletal imbalances can create positive physiological and psychological changes as well. Your body affects your mind and your mind affects your body because really it’s all connected! A regular practice of yoga can help you manage or eliminate chronic back pain and empowers you to create positive changes in your life.

