

QUESTION

Namaste.

I discovered a few months ago, after getting an X-ray and an MRI that I have Osteo Arthritis in 5 of my Cervical discs C3 a C7.

I have not returned to a regular yoga practice because most of the poses/positions causes pain in my neck, right shoulder and middle back. I was also getting tingling in my right arm, from my fingertips up to my shoulder. (I do miss my Yoga practice a lot).

Could you please suggest or tell me a few poses that would not cause any more damage to me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Namaste.

Helen Fong

ANSWER

Osteoarthritis (OA) also known as degenerative arthritis or degenerative joint disease or osteoarthrosis, is a group of mechanical abnormalities involving degradation of joints. A variety of causes – hereditary, developmental, metabolic, and mechanical deficits – may initiate processes leading to loss of cartilage. When bone surfaces become less well protected by cartilage, bone may be exposed and damaged. As a result of decreased movement secondary to pain, regional muscles atrophy and ligament become lax.

The main symptom of OA is pain, causing loss of ability and often stiffness. “Pain” is generally described as a sharp ache or a burning sensation in the associated muscles and tendons.

OA commonly affects the hands, feet, spine, and the large weight bearing joints, such as the hips and knees, although in theory, any joint in the body can be affected. As OA progresses, the affected joints appear larger, are stiff and painful, and usually feel better with gentle use but worse with excessive or prolonged use.

The tendency in osteoarthritis to avoid movement in order to avoid pain quickly leads to immobility. For those with osteoarthritis, it is bet to do range-of-motion exercises, which at the same time do not stress the joints. All of these movements should be low impact, smooth and rhythmic. Clearly, yoga asanas have great potential use here in reducing muscle tension at the joints so that bone-on-bone contact is minimized.

If there is pain in a synovial joint (A *synovial joint* is one in which the ends of the bones are enclosed in a capsule containing a thick, slippery liquid called synovial fluid.), then we tend to avoid moving it. However, when a synovial joint is not used, the joint capsule shrinks and stiffens, and the range of motion about the joint tends toward zero. Then end result of shying away from a painful joint in the long term is a “frozen joint” in which little or no motion is

possible. If a joint has been injured and is in pain, it is best to accept that this is the body's way of insuring sufficient rest for the injury, but if it is allowed to rest so completely that it goes into retirement, then its movement may be lost forever.

The proper alignment of the bones comprising a joint is important in that misalignment can lead to swelling and/or thickening of the surrounding tissue, which in the vicinity of the joints is rich in both nerves and blood vessels. Compression of these tissues can be deleterious, especially in the vertebral joints.

When practicing yoga asanas, it is useful to remember that the range of angular motion at a synovial joint is largest when the joint is most open, i.e., when the ball and socket are most disengaged. Thus in Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), first extend each femur from the groin to the knee, and with the hips joints opened in this way, then rotate the thighs so as to bring the knees toward the floor. Similarly, in Ustrasana (Camel Pose), while upright, lengthen the spine by lifting the ribcage up and away from the pelvis, and with the vertebrae disengaged in this way, then maintain this opening as the spine is bent backward.

In the Knoff Yoga 24 Principles of Practice we call this “most open concept “Creating Space”, where we effectively make more room in the joints for easier and fuller range of motion. Creating Space is important in all of our joints, and even more in those affected with OA.

When there is compression and restriction, there is pain. As we Create Space within the joints and move the ends of the bones away from each other, we start to reduce the pain, and provide the opportunity for the body to heal.

It is very important that students of yoga asana realize that hyper-mobility at the joints (hyperextended knees, etc.) is very dangerous, as this can easily injure nearby soft tissue or allow catastrophic collapse of the joint when the student works at maximum intensity. Such collapse is resisted in part by the ligaments about a joint which act as collagenous straps to maintain its integrity. Improper practice over a long period of time can overcome this safety factor, with disastrous results.

Practically everyone who is 10 or more kilos overweight will show signs of osteoarthritis due to the added pressure of the weight on joints, which acts to wear away the protective coating on the ends of the bone. Yoga asanas done with special attention to keeping the joints open can work to resist the collapsed of the joints and so reduce wear on their protective cartilage.

Another point to consider is that when one part of the body is in pain, all parts tend to suffer. With practice, we therefore need to include a balanced program, and the Knoff Yoga System with its 11 Asana Groups is ideal for this.

With practice, pain is always our guide and we respect it. My recommendation is to practice slowly and gently, without strain, adjusting day-to-day according to your pain and energy levels and not being concerned at all with what you can or can not do. It is important to work at your own pace and not attempt any comparisons to what you were capable of doing in the past. Respect your current situation and honour your body with the intelligent application of the Knoff Yoga system: Asana, Relaxation, Pranayama, Meditation and Philosophy.

The best program for you to rehabilitate your neck is the Knoff Yoga Discovery syllabus.

The focus should be on smooth fluid movements, do not rush through the practice. The pain you have described through the neck, shoulder and arm can be attributed to compression – effecting joint spaces, and impinging blood, nerve and lymph flow. All these structures are highly sensitized, particularly when constricted.

I would recommend gradually building up the stamina to do a succession of Sun Salutations. Mindfully keeping the chest open, spine tall and head on a long neck as you fluidly raise your arms out to the side and over your head will, bit by bit improve the mechanics of your spine/shoulder/neck positioning.

Another recommendation would be to start and end your yoga practice lying with your legs up the wall – Viparita Karani. This is very restful and rejuvenating, and also has the benefit of putting the spine in a long position where the force of gravity helps distract the spine (as opposed to the compression of gravity when upright). Some days when things are difficult, just getting into this position for 5-10 minutes can make a huge difference in what you feel capable of.

Also, staying in Advadanta Sirsasana 1 (Dolphin Pose) for longer would be very helpful; allowing the neck to relax and soften, so you can decompress your spine with the gentle pull of gravity.

Namaste

Nicky Knoff