

I have been in many yoga classes where, at the beginning of class, the teacher asks whether any students have an injury. Sometimes the students describe their injuries openly in the class. Other times the teachers visit with the students privately (usually in child posture) because some students may be reluctant to discuss their injuries in front of the class.

The teacher then begins the class. However, rarely do I see the teacher paying special attention to the injured students. I think this is for several reasons. First, if the class is large, the teacher may not have the time to run the class and spend the time on the injured students. Second, the teacher may not have the expertise to give personal guidance to students who may have a broad range of injuries and conditions. And third, some teachers may find it difficult to remember which students are injured and what their injuries are while they are teaching their class.

Should Teachers Ask About Injuries Before Class?

How does the legal system treat a teacher who has actual knowledge of a student's injury, does not give the student personal care during class and the student suffers an injury? Is the teacher in a better position or a weaker position because they have knowledge of the student's injury as a result of asking at the beginning of a class?

From a legal point of view, a teacher who asks about pre-existing injuries and has actual knowledge about an injured student is in a weaker legal position than a teacher who does not ask and has no actual knowledge about injuries.

If a teacher has actual knowledge that a student is injured, the law imposes a duty of reasonable care on the teacher to monitor the student and ensure that he or she does not aggravate the injury. If the teacher does not fulfill this duty, then the teacher may be found liable for the damages if a student is injured.

Teachers must fulfill their duty of care even though it may be very difficult to monitor several injured students in a large and dynamic yoga class.

If I Have Actual Knowledge of a Student's Injuries, What Should I Do?

You must pay special attention to your injured students and suggest modifications to prevent them from aggravating their injuries. In special cases, you may need to suggest that the student attend a different class. For example, this could include pregnant students or beginning students who are injured but who want to take an advanced class. If you are teaching yoga in a hot studio, then you should be even more cautious in taking care of your injured students if it is not appropriate for their situation.

In my many discussions with teachers about this situation most want to know about their student's condition so that they can offer compassionate support in class. But the question remains: do you have the competence to care for injured students and can you fulfill your duty of care for those students in the context of a large and dynamic yoga class?

If the answer to these questions is "no", then you should not be asking students at the beginning of class if they have any injuries.

If I Don't Ask About Injuries, How Should I Teach?

But what should you do if you decide not to ask about injuries in class? I recommend that you make a general announcement at the beginning of class that students should modify their poses to “keep themselves safe” or to “honor their bodies” or similar language. You should emphasize that those students with injuries should exercise special caution to care for themselves. In addition, you should offer several different modifications to the class for your poses. This is important because many students do not know how to modify their poses and simply telling them to modify will not offer them very much meaningful guidance.

What If a Student Volunteers Medical Information?

What should you do if a student volunteers information about a medical condition? Since you have actual knowledge of the condition, your duty to take reasonable care of that student has been triggered and you should do all you can to give that student special attention to protect he or she from injury. It may seem somewhat unfair if you did not ask for this information but it is the right thing to do both from a legal and a yogic point of view.

We should contrast this with those teachers who offer classes that are intended to teach students who have injuries or serious medical conditions. For example, I know a teacher that offers classes for students who have cancer. I know another who has classes just for runners. In those cases the teachers have special training and are competent to take care of the students. Also, if everyone in the class has the same medical situation, it is much easier for the teacher to offer a class that is appropriate for all of the students.

Medical Information on Release Forms

A related question is whether you should solicit medical information in a form of release or a new student questionnaire. In my experience, this is fairly common practice with yoga studios.

However, I do not think it is a good idea to gather medical history from your students because this practice raises many practical and legal questions.

Are you prepared to keep the student’s information strictly confidential and implement a security process? Are you prepared to require your students to update their condition if it changes? What about your existing students who provided you with information about their medical condition but it subsequently changes? Do your teachers actually review the information about all of the students who are in their class before the start of class and use the information? Are your teachers trained and able to give individual attention to each student’s medical needs within a class setting?

From a legal point of view, the problem is much the same as soliciting information about injuries at the beginning of a class. If you have actual knowledge of a student’s medical condition that you obtained from a questionnaire, then you have a duty to use reasonable care to protect the student from further harm.

However, as you can see, there are lots of practical problems with protecting sensitive medical information, keeping it current, and giving it to your teachers so that they can properly use it.