

Don't Let Wrist Pain Stop Your Yoga

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Introduction

Many people experience pain in their wrists at various times. This pain may be exacerbated in yoga poses that put weight on the hands, particularly those requiring a 90 degree extension of the wrists. Unfortunately, this includes many common yoga poses, such as Plank, Cat/Cow, and Table, while Downward Facing Dog requires slightly less extension.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce options which a student with wrist pain can try, including strengthening and stretching the forearms and wrists, using props, and modifying poses.

Causes and Cautions

The causes of wrist pain are varied and include osteoarthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome and other repetitive strain injuries (RSI), sprains and other sudden injuries, and lack of flexibility from disuse. Some cases may be severe and others less so. Each case is different and should be treated as such. What will work for one may not work, or may not work as well, for another. Students with severe pain should consult their doctor and perhaps postpone any weight-bearing activities until some healing has occurred. Yoga can make a significant contribution to healing wrist conditions; however, performing asanas without regard for pain can also make the condition worse. In all cases, students should be advised to **listen to their own bodies** and to distinguish between pain and the discomfort felt by working at one's "edge". Students in group classes and in flowing sequences such as sun salutations are particularly at risk due to trying to keep up with their classmates and in performing sequences where they do not have enough time to feel their way into a pose.

Anatomy

The wrist consists of several small bones at the base of the hand, plus tendons, ligaments, arteries and veins. The radius (the forearm bone nearest the thumb) is a larger bone than the ulna (the forearm bone nearest the little finger) and is designed to bear more weight than the ulna. For this reason, it is better to put more weight on the mounds of the thumb and the index and middle fingers and less on the ring and little finger mounds. Wrist problems will be aggravated if the greater weight is on the outside of the hands, or on the heel of the palm, or if the mound of the index finger comes up off the floor.

In the forearm itself, the underside (palm side) is weaker than the top of the forearm, which tends to be overused and tense. In Downward Dog this weakness makes it difficult to press through the palm firmly enough to properly relieve the weight on the wrist.

Possible solutions

1. Avoid yoga.

This may be the worst solution, yet it is likely one that is taken by many people who simply assume that they are unable to participate in yoga because of their pain. However, it may be advisable at times in certain circumstances.

2. Avoid all poses that place weight on the hands.

Again, this is usually not a good solution for most people, except perhaps temporarily, as it rules out the potential contributions that yoga can make to healing. However, the other benefits of yoga may still attain, such as stress relief and benefits to other parts of the body. However, poses that put an excessive amount of weight on a single hand, such as Side Plank, or the entire weight of the body on the hands, as in handstands and arm balances, should be avoided entirely.

3. Eliminate the original cause of the pain.

In cases of RSI caused by extensive computer keyboard use, an ergonomic keyboard may help. Also, taking frequent breaks (every 20 minutes or so) will help. Get up and walk around, or do some wrist stretching and other movements at the desk.

4. Get individual instruction.

A yoga instructor knowledgeable about wrist issues can tailor a program to specifically work with or around the issues. After a period of time, the student's increased knowledge and strength may enable her to participate in a group class.

5. Consult a health practitioner.

A doctor may have specific recommendations, or at least a diagnosis, which will suggest the appropriate approach. A period of rest and recovery may be required. Some chiropractors specialize in manipulating the extremities and can adjust the bones of the wrist, which can move out of place fairly easily.

6. Use props.

Some props change the angle of extension to less than 90 degrees, which may be all that is required. These include aids to lifting the heels of the hands while shifting weight to the mounds of the fingers: a wedge (specific foam wedges exist for this purpose), the rolled-up edge of a yoga mat, or several thicknesses of a blanket. Hand barbells with square ends can keep the wrists essentially straight; an example is a product called "gripitz". A product called "Wrist Assured Gloves" supports the wrists, relieves pain and helps maintain alignment in yoga poses.

7. Stretch.

Flex and extend the wrists using some of these methods. Do these stretches often, gradually increasing the amount of the extension.

- (1) Hold one arm in front of the body with the elbow straight and the fingers up. With the other hand, press the upright fingers gently backward, stretching the inside of the forearm; hold.
- (2) Repeat the above exercise with the palm up and the fingers facing down.
- (3) Hold one arm in front of the body with the elbow straight and the fingers down. With the other hand, gently pull your fingers down towards the floor to stretch the back of the forearm; hold.
- (4) Press your hands together in front of you in prayer position. Lift the elbows and keep the palms together. Press your hands down toward your waist.

8. Strengthen the appropriate muscles.

Strengthen the muscles with some of these exercises, performed daily.

- (1) Clench your fist tightly and slowly rotate it nine times clockwise and nine times counterclockwise. Then stretch the fingers and thumb apart as widely as possible
- (2) Make a loose fist with the palm facing up and do curls with the wrist.
- (3) Turn the fist palm down and do small upward curls with a weight.

9. Align correctly

Improper alignment can create wrist pain where none previously existed. Wrists should generally be as wide as the shoulders, with fingers stretched forward and the middle fingers parallel to each other. Weight must be properly distributed on the hands: it should be primarily on the mounds of the index and middle fingers and of the thumbs, and not on the little finger side nor on the heel of the hand. Press down with the knuckles where the fingers join the palms.

In Downward Dog do not put too much weight on the arms. Bend the knees as needed and extend the back to transfer weight to the legs and feet.

10. Modify poses.

Some poses can be modified so that less weight is put on the hands and / or the wrist extension is less.

Plank and Table lend themselves to modification by placing fists on the floor instead of the palms. This way, the wrist is not bent and the knuckles bear the weight. A possible concern is that it may contribute to breakdown of the knuckles. Also, using a single fist cannot be recommended for side plank where only one fist would support the upper body, as it could lead to wobbling and collapse of the supporting arm.

In Cat/Cow, placing the hands a few inches forward of the shoulders instead of directly under the shoulders reduces the amount of wrist extension and may relieve pain. The amount of extension can be varied and increased over time.

Downward Dog can be modified in several ways. One way is by placing the palms against a wall with the arms and torso parallel to the floor. Another is to use an armless chair: holding the sides of the chair, walk your feet backwards, then pull your hips back, keeping your arms and back straight.

For a modified Plank, hold the seat of an armless chair and with your hands under your shoulders, walk your feet back until your body forms a straight line from heel to hip to shoulder to ear.

Practicing Downward Dog and Plank in these positions strengthens the wrists, arms and shoulders, preparing them for the full pose which may be achievable later.

11. Use alternate poses.

The same spinal movements of Cat/Cow may be replicated while sitting on the floor with the legs crossed, one ankle in front of the other, and alternately arching the spine forward and backward. This could also be done in a standing position with the hands on the thighs. Or do cat/cow from the usual position but with the elbows and forearms on the floor.

Replace Downward Dog with Dolphin (or Quarter Dog) pose, with the forearms on the floor, or with Half Downward Facing Dog at the wall.

Conclusion

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that caution must be exercised when dealing with wrist pain, as it can be worsened rather than lessened by practicing yoga. The best approach is to proceed carefully and consistently, gradually increasing strength and flexibility, and advancing to more weight-bearing poses once one is comfortable with the less weight-bearing poses.

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