



*Troubled by controversial claims that yoga can wreck your body, KAT TANCOCK takes a cold, hard look at the practice she loves*

**IANE FERIEG** THOUGHT SHE would be doing her body a favour when she got an unlimited yoga pass for just \$50 a month. A 28-year-old student in Toronto at the time, she wanted an antidote for long days spent sitting and stressing. She went to the physically demanding Ashtanga classes five days a week, until one day, while doing downward dog, she fell and dislocated her shoulder.

Back then she blamed her sweaty palms, but these days Ferieg, now a yoga therapist helping people in Toronto and Montreal improve their health through yoga, understands there were other factors at play. First, she says, her ego got in the way: "I hadn't learned yet to go at my own pace instead of trying to keep up with the class." Second, she now realizes she'd been downward-dogging wrong the whole time, straining her shoulders, and

her teacher, tasked with handling too large a class, failed to notice.

As a yoga devotee for 16 years and now a teacher myself, I'm a true believer in the practice's benefits: It helped me conquer a teenage back injury and, more recently, rehabbed a nasty knee sprain that left me limping for weeks. So when I first read the recent *New York Times Magazine* article alleging a silent epidemic of yoga injuries (excerpted from journalist William J. Broad's book, *The Science of Yoga*), my knee-jerk reaction was to brush off the anecdotes of over-the-top behaviour—like the guy who sat on his heels for hours at a time—as outliers, people who made dumb decisions and got the injuries they deserved.

But then I realized that aside from those drastic cases, Broad was calling attention to real problems. After all, I know first-hand how challenging it is for teachers to guide

students into even basic alignments. When taking classes I often spot students doing off-kilter poses, or exerting themselves so hard I fear they'll have an aneurysm right then and there—never mind develop subtle injuries such as the nagging pain in my left shoulder when I overdo sun salutations.

Yoga isn't hockey, and getting beat up shouldn't be part of the package. But the truth is, many people are doing moves they shouldn't be—and getting hurt in the process.

#### **AN INJURY EPIDEMIC?**

It's hard to pinpoint how many people get hurt doing yoga. In the U.S., the Consumer Product Safety Commission counted more than 7,000 injuries treated in doctor's offices and ERs in 2010—mainly overstretching and repetitive strain in the neck, shoulders, spine, legs >

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and knees—but that number is likely a drop in the bucket considering that an estimated 15.8 million Americans practise yoga. In a 2009 global survey that asked yoga pros about the most serious injuries they'd seen, lower-back issues topped the list, followed by shoulder, knee and neck afflictions.

“There is this undercurrent of serious injury,” says Broad, who has been practising yoga himself since 1970. In his book he uncovered “terrible, nightmarish” cases—such as strokes caused by extreme bending of the neck. And while he admits these severe injuries aren't common, he stresses that they're life-altering and so deserve more attention. Although his article whipped many in the yoga world into a fury, Broad was also vindicated by the “huge file” of letters he amassed from people relating their own horror stories (everything from vertigo to disc injuries).

Dr. Raza Awan, a sports medicine physician in Toronto, says that he rarely comes across patients who have been seriously hurt by yoga, though he admits a growing number of devotees are walking through his door. The most prevalent injuries he sees are related to overuse, whether it's from repeating the same routine religiously (à la Bikram) or doing intensive workshops or teacher training. Most common, he says, are back problems, followed by shoulder tendonitis and rotator cuff strain. Other recurring issues include wrist pain, twisted knees and neck problems.

But teachers such as Maxine

Munro, co-owner of Therapeutic Approach Yoga Studio in Halifax, are skeptical that extreme injuries are widespread. “[With] the kind of yoga I teach, we don't move into poses with that much aggression,” she says. Still, she admits that some poses (such as the shoulder stand) are inherently riskier, and either doesn't teach them at all, or teaches them with great caution, so students always have the option of dialing down the difficulty.

## WHY WE'RE GETTING HURT

For an activity meant to help us transcend everyday desires, it's ironic that a lot of injuries come down to ego—both on the students' part, and the instructors'. “Some people treat yoga like a competition,” says Dr. Awan, who has taught injury prevention to yoga teachers. “They look at what others are doing and try to get to that point, even if their bodies aren't ready for it.”

Some teachers may be to blame too, especially if they're blessed with pretzel-like limbs and don't easily empathize with the less bendy in their classrooms. Jenny Knox, for example, was a beginner when she signed up for yoga classes in Toronto in 2010. While she didn't have a good feeling about the teacher (“She was a bit aggressive verbally”), she stuck it out so she could learn enough to practise at home. Then, about six classes in, the teacher forcefully pushed her leg deeper into a hamstring stretch. “It made me scream,” Knox says. It took a year for her to heal from what

turned out to be a complicated set of injuries.

Was it the teacher's fault? Absolutely. Was it yoga's fault? That's not so easy to say. “People tend to invest a lot of authority in teachers,” explains Broad. “They don't listen perhaps as closely as they should to their own bodies.” That doesn't mean Knox could have prevented what was clearly an assault on her hamstring. But it does mean it's crucial to stay keenly aware that no teacher can know exactly how you're feeling—and that how you move in class should ultimately be up to you. (I, for one, am paranoid about students hurting themselves in my classes. So if I ask if your knee is okay, please be honest—it's often my only feedback before I guide you deeper.)

Surprisingly, Dr. Awan has found that it's the most flexible yogis who get injured the most—maybe because they're reaching the end of their range of motion in certain poses, and “hanging off” tendons and ligaments. Forward bends are a major culprit for back problems, he says, especially when done repeatedly. Wrist injuries are often related to plank pose and arm balances—anything with the body's weight on the hands, which ideally is spread across an engaged palm and into the fingers, but is frequently and incorrectly centred on the wrists.

Hip-opening postures such as the pigeon can twist the knee, Dr. Awan adds—and tight hips, exacerbated by day-long sitting at desk jobs, can put even more pressure on the knee in these poses—while upside-down >

positions such as the shoulder stand and headstand can strain the neck. Still, he believes that many so-called yoga injuries aren't caused by yoga per se; rather the poses aggravate what's already stressed in our bodies.

And that's why it's essential to find a form of yoga that works for

## HOW TO DO YOGA SAFELY

All poses are potentially harmful if you don't know what you're doing. Follow these tips to avoid injury:

- If you're a novice, pick a gentle style such as yin, Hatha or restorative instead of the more challenging Ashtanga, Bikram or Vinyasa.
- Start with smaller or private classes. Or try a pre-registered program (as opposed to drop-in sessions), so you and your teacher can get to know each other better.
- Look for an experienced teacher with at least 200 hours of training from a school registered with Yoga Alliance, an organization that certifies training programs internationally.
- Disclose past or current injuries so your teacher can help you modify poses.
- Cross-train with yoga as you would with any sport, sports medicine physician Dr. Raza Awan recommends. Balance Thursday-night Bikram, for instance, with Sunday-morning restorative.
- Don't be afraid to back off from a move or take breaks. Even if you're fit, it doesn't mean you'll know how to execute the poses, so don't push yourself too fast.
- Be aware of how you feel. Watch your breath, says yoga instructor Maxine Munro. "If you can keep the breath steady, you can listen to the wisdom in your body."

you—not for your best friend or favourite celeb. "Every single body is different," says Kathryn Beet, director of Toronto studio Yogaspace. (Full disclosure: She's one of my teachers.) "Not only does one need to learn how to do yoga safely, but how to do yoga safely within the context of the body they're living in." That means figuring out your hot spots, whether it's cable-tight hamstrings or nagging neck pain, as well as working around health concerns such as pregnancy or high blood pressure. And if you don't know what you're doing, talk to your teacher.

### WORTH THE RISKS?

As for Broad, he's deemed some poses simply too dangerous. At the top of his list are the ones that torque or put weight on the neck and upper spine—these have the highest potential for serious damage, in his opinion. He no longer practises the shoulder stand, which involves raising the legs and torso perpendicular to the ground and resting the body's entire weight on the shoulders, head and upper arms. He's also hesitant about the headstand, so he's careful to put most of his weight on his forearms as opposed to his head and neck.

That said, Broad is as dedicated as ever to his decades-long habit, and if anything, slogging through the yoga research has given him more reason to believe in its benefits: taming stress, improving balance and flexibility, counteracting aging and even acting as a natural aphrodisiac. "It has increased my appreciation of the subtlety of what yoga does," he says.

"I pay attention to things in my body that I didn't pay attention to before." And despite treating his share of yoga injuries, Dr. Awan knows its healing power, too. "The benefits way outweigh the risks," he says, noting that yoga has benefited many patients with chronic injuries from other sports. What's key is finding the version that suits your body best. "Not everyone can do Ashtanga yoga," he says of the popular power style. "It doesn't mean there's not a type of yoga you can do." □

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