



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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YOGA THERAPY

Last month I introduced the subject of yoga therapy and I provided a series of postures to help relieve physical fatigue. This month we will consider the importance of the psoas muscle and how a tightened psoas muscle can cause problems with hips, lower back, knees and even shoulders.

The Psoas

Whether you suffer from a sore back or anxiety, from knee strain or exhaustion, there's a good chance that a constricted psoas muscle might be contributing to your problems. The psoas is the deepest and one of the largest muscles in the body. On each side of your lumbar spine, it attaches to the vertebrae and stretches over the hip joint to attach at your femur (inner thigh).

All yoga postures are enhanced by a released rather than shortened psoas. In your yoga practice, if you feel strain in your knees or lower back in seated and standing postures, your body may be telling you that you need to lengthen your psoas. If your abdominal muscles are weak you may be using your psoas muscles to compensate and then the psoas muscles becomes shortened and tight and can pull your lumbar spine out of alignment. The key to a healthy psoas is to learn to use your abdominal muscles correctly and to include postures in your yoga practice that release and lengthen your psoas.

The Drawstring and the Zip-Up

You can use this technique to learn how to work your core muscles without stressing your psoas. Lie on your back with your legs straight, your knees and toes pointing toward the ceiling. Place your fingertips on your hip points, the bony points at the front of your hipbones.

With your legs straight and firm, activate both legs as though you're trying to lift them off the floor. Don't lift them but this action allows you to feel a firming in your abdomen in the space between your hip joints. This firming is the transverse abdominis muscle working and it should feel like tightening a drawstring on a pair of sweatpants.

So the full action is to gently rotate your thighs inward and feel your hip points rolling inward. Now the zip-up. Pull up the mula bandha (pelvic floor), the lower abdominal muscles and then draw your belly back just below your navel toward your spine and up toward your heart, as though you were zipping up a tight pair of jeans. Pulling your navel toward your spine is engaging the uddiyana bandha.

True core strength is developed by using these two actions – the drawstring and the zip-up – during your yoga practice. Core strengthening results from getting the abdominals and the psoas to work well together. The sequence of postures listed overleaf provides work for the abdominals while paying close attention to lengthening the psoas.


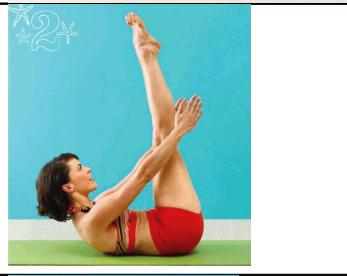

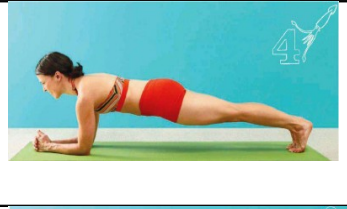

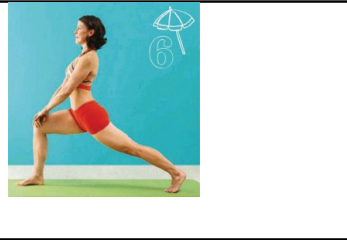
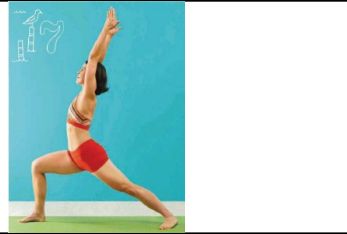
SUPTA BADDHAKONASANA

Use this posture as another way to feel the drawstring and zip-up effect. Close your eyes and as you exhale engage the mula bandha, pull up the lower abdominals, and engage the uddiyana bandha. Relax as you inhale and repeat five times.



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Postures to Work the Abdominals and Lengthen the Psoas

<p>SUPTA PADANGUSTHASANA will tone your abdominal muscles and lengthen your psoas. Use the drawstring and the zip-up instructions on the front page. As you lift your right leg, keep your left leg turning inward which will release your left psoas muscle. If your left leg turns outward you will shorten the psoas. Hold this posture for 10 breaths and repeat on the other side.</p>	
<p>TORSO CURL will maximise the work in your abdominal muscles and minimise the pull of your psoas on your lower back. Bend your knees and extend your arms. Press your knees together and squeeze your hip points toward each other as you curl your tailbone up towards the ceiling. As you exhale, straighten your legs and curl your torso up, reaching your hands towards your knees. As you inhale bend your knees and release your torso down. Repeat 5 times moving with your breath.</p>	
<p>PURVOTTANASANA or upward plank works your rectus abdominis while releasing and lengthening the psoas. Sit with your knees bent, feet hip-width apart and your hands behind you a bit wider than your feet. Inhale and lift your hips to the height of your knees. Squeeze your hip points inward and zip up making any signs of a potbelly disappear. Hold for 5 to 8 breaths.</p>	
<p>FOREARM PLANK creates stability and strength in your core while keeping your psoas neutral. Interlock your fingers and lift your hips to shoulder height. Squeeze your hip points toward each other to release the psoas. Now draw your belly in and up toward your heart while lengthening back towards your heels. Hold for 5 to 8 breaths.</p>	
<p>VASISTHASANA This variation of side plank takes pressure off your wrists and challenges your core muscles, encouraging your psoas to release and lengthen. Lie on your side and lift up onto your right forearm. Lift your hips, making a straight line from your heels to your head. Squeeze your shoulders back and your hip points toward each other as you draw your lower belly in and up. Hold for 5 to 8 breaths. Repeat on the other side.</p>	
<p>HIGH LUNGE tones your abdominal muscles while lengthening your psoas and stretching your quadriceps. From standing or kneeling, step your right foot forward into a lunge. Straighten and firm your left leg. Squeeze your hip points toward each other and engage your lower belly. Sink your hips down lower while keeping the left leg straight. Hold for 10 breaths and then change legs.</p>	
<p>VIRABHADRASANA I (Warrior I) allows you to pull the drawstring and zip up and moves you deeper into lengthening the psoas. Step your right foot forward and press your left heel down. Place your hands on your hip points. Lean forward and squeeze your hip points together. As you lift your torso, firm your lower belly and zip up. Hold for 10 breaths and repeat on the other side.</p>	
<p>EKA PADA RAJAKAPOTASANA (One-legged king pigeon) stretches and releases your psoas. Come onto your hands and knees and bring your right knee up to your right wrist with your foot pointing out to the left. Lean your upper body forward and stretch your left leg back. Squeeze your hip points toward each other. Move your lower belly in and up and lift your torso lengthening your psoas. Hold for 15 breaths and repeat on the other side.</p>	