NEW YORK TIMES Ask an Expert Series May 8, 2013

**Advice on Practicing Yoga in Middle Age, Part 1**

**By THE NEW YORK TIMES**

More than 100 readers [submitted questions about aging and yoga](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/01/booming/yoga-for-the-middle-aged-questions.html)to [Dr. Loren Fishman](http://sciatica.org/about/loren.html), a back-pain and rehabilitative medicine specialist who has long incorporated yoga into patient care. In 1972, before applying to medical school, he studied yoga with B.K.S. Iyengar for a year in Pune, India. Dr. Fishman is medical director of [Manhattan Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation](http://www.manhattanphysicalmedicine.com/doctors.html) in New York City, an assistant clinical professor at Columbia Medical School and an associate editor of the journal Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation. He is also an author of eight books, including “[Yoga for Osteoporosis](http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=8588): the Complete Guide.”

Here is part one of his responses. More from Dr. Fishman will be posted next week, but because of the volume, not all questions may be answered.*New questions are no longer being accepted.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Is yoga good for the aging population? My answer is yes. A couple of years ago I ran into my yoga teacher, B.K.S. Iyengar, at a conference in India. Though he was over 90 years old, he was capable of traveling to China and giving a three-day workshop consisting of classes that lasted for many hours each day. When he saw me he rose gracefully from his chair and greeted me by name, though we hadn’t seen each other for more than 20 years. I think Mr. Iyengar is an example of what yoga can do for an aging human. To me he seemed like a man 30 years younger. And, in a way, beyond age.

**AGING AND YOGA**

*Q. Are there any aspects to yoga practice that the over-50 practitioner should give up if she/he is healthy and otherwise feeling well? How about after 70? What poses cause the most injuries, and which might help protect or rehabilitate common yoga-associated injuries? — Elizabeth, Lenox, Mass.*

**A.**Yes, there are things you may need to give up in your yoga practice as you get older. People age differently, and yet there are characteristic aspects to aging. Chronic conditions are cumulative. With [osteoporosis you can do](http://sciatica.org/yoga/12poses.html) forward bends to as far as your hips will carry you without pushing, keeping your back slightly arched if possible, and preventing it from slouching forward no matter what. As my fellow yoga devotee Leslie Kaminoff has rightly noted, this avoidance of forward bending too can be carried to phobic extremes: good posture and sensible bending and lifting is an antidote to osteoporotic fractures; flexibility, coordination, balance and strength are the best prevention of hip fractures. Standing poses like the tree, the warrior trilogy, and half-moon promote these positive traits and are among the last poses one should give up as one ages.

Arthritis will respond to yoga. [Supta padangusthasana](http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/147) is as safe and as good as a pose gets, and will help with safe forward bending, too, by lengthening the hamstrings and stretching the hips’ capsule. We will come to many more suggestions and caveats in the questions and answers that follow.

*Q. For fit people without specific health issues in middle age who already practice yoga, it would be nice to have knowledge about and access to a series of poses appropriate for this age group, which can be arranged into routines of various difficulties to form the core of a yoga class. Also targeting areas, like the lower back, with specific poses for this age group would be helpful. We can then take this knowledge to and practice it with our local yoga community. Thanks. — David, Maine*

*Q. Which yoga styles are best if you’re starting at age 50? — LOL, Ithaca*

*Q. I am 61. Very inflexible, have a history of low back and neck pain that are currently minor. I get regular exercise at a gym and I hike in the mountains several times a week. What is the best way to get introduced to yoga? — Burrito’s, Westbrook, Maine*

**A.**Besides these readers, Big Bird from NYC and SH and Pinotman from Chicago wrote in wanting to know the best place and the best way to begin or resume yoga when you are over 50. The absolute best way is to find out what your liabilities are, and this is an individual matter, requiring a medical visit or summary. The next step is an appointment with an experienced and smart yoga teacher, one on one. Group classes are an artifact of urban economics: the teacher cannot afford to live in the city in which she teaches any other way. But chronic conditions are cumulative, by definition: when you’re older you need the individual attention that yoga has traditionally offered.

I believe the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar are the most anatomically sophisticated and therapeutically oriented, but there are many other good types of yoga. You’ll need a resourceful and sensitive person to get you started, and to introduce you to an appropriate yoga practice that you can do every day. Then, after a month or two or three, you should go back to that person for a reassessment and suggestions about how to progress to the next step. Yoga, practiced consistently, does good things to your temperament and perceptions.

*Q. Any age-related additional risk factors with respect to the vertebral artery during shoulder stand and plow poses? — JPT, Ohio*

*Q. I am 55 and began yoga two months ago. I go every other day, but I still have problems with the balance poses. I did not have these issues in my youth. Is it typical to have more balance issues as you get older? — AJT, Madison*

**A.**Most arteries become more brittle, and are more easily injured, just as the skin gets more delicate with age. Shoulder stand, plow, and poses like the gate should be trimmed back from their extremes for safety after the age of 70. The vertebral artery actually figures in nourishing a number of neurological structures critical to good balance and coordination, so it is worth our care. Our sense of balance can also be degraded with age decreased sensitivity to changes in direction and momentum in the semicircular canals(offshoots of our hearing apparatus that detect changes in speed and direction of movement), decreased proprioception (lowered awareness of position and relative location) in the joints and in one's feet, and less acute vision. These are the three determinants of balance: the inner ears, proprioception and vision.

Do the precarious poses against or very close to a wall. The wall is a wonderful, supportive teacher.

**BACK PAIN AND SCIATICA**

*Q. I am 48, in good shape cardiovascular-wise (runner), and decided to try yoga recently. All went well initially but of late I have had considerable back pain both when sitting and lying flat. Could I have an injury? If it’s just sore muscles, will it eventually get better if I keep doing it? — MB, Ohio*

**A.** First, much back pain is *discovered* in yoga class but really has its origins elsewhere. Second, yoga can cause back pain, and then, as always, the question is: what is the diagnosis? Pain is a symptom, not a disease. Without a diagnosis you’re left to guess about proper treatment, for the same pain can have causes so different that treatments are diametrically opposite.

One way to decide if it’s sore muscles or a neurological injury is if the pain goes down one or both legs or radiates. Does anything tingle, is some part of your leg numb? If so, it’s nerve pain, indicating an injury that merits further inquiry. If not, it’s probably a muscle spasm or strain, and stretching should make it feel better. I say probably because someone could also have a spinal fracture, facet arthritis, spondylolysis or other problem. The bottom line is that you need a diagnosis before yoga or anything else can be used rationally to help.

*Q. I have sciatica and a herniated disc so bad I want to cry. I’m on prescription pain killers but I’d rather be better, not drugged up. Will yoga help sciatica? — Linda, Oklahoma*

**A.**Sciatica — nerve pain that goes down the leg along the course of the sciatic nerve — can be helped with yoga, but it must be done with extreme care. A herniated disc responds to extension, and may be worsened by flexion; spinal stenosis improves with flexion, and is exacerbated by extension — yet both can cause sciatica, and the same exact distribution of numbness, weakness and pain. And about 5 percent of the time, the treatments reverse: extension helps stenosis, flexion is good for herniated discs. So start tentatively, be sensitive to the changes you feel, and progress slowly.

My colleagues and I discuss back pain more fully on our Web site, [Sciatica.org](http://sciatica.org/index.html). I have poses — many of them modified for those in pain or unable to do the full pose — in a book I wrote with Carol Ardman, “[Yoga for Back Pain](http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=24042).” There are chapters on herniated disc, spinal stenosis, and how to tell the difference between the two. Yoga with physical therapy is an excellent choice for someone with either a herniated disc or spinal stenosis. But first, the diagnosis.

*Q.* *I had disk surgery in the 1990s and sciatica has returned. I have tried interventions to avoid additional surgery. I was told, however, to stop yoga and continue with Pilates on the reformer. I stretch my hamstrings and do a few poses daily after a hot shower. I walk a lot but want to maintain my upper body strength. What are your thoughts? Thanks. — RNC71, DC*

*Q. Can yoga help in dealing with sciatic pain? Are there particular poses that can relieve sciatica? — Henry Rabinowitz, San Francisco*

*Q. I have sciatica and a herniated disc also. I used to practice yoga years ago on a daily basis until my back started to bother me. I cannot do any forward or backward bends at all. I miss the yoga postures and how limber it made me feel. Is there any yoga postures that people with back problems can do? — Cate, New York*

**A.**To RNC71, if sciatica has returned after an initial surgery, I would not confine myself to Pilates on the reformer. Pilates is good for the healthy, and there are people who describe themselves as Pilates therapists, applying and modifying Pilates practices to form a healing regimen. Still, I have not encountered the type of rigorous scientific work, nor the long of therapeutic benefit that you find in yoga. Instead of Pilates, I would do gentle yoga, restorative yoga, lift weights while lying down on your back (taking all weight off the discs) and continue walking a lot.

Henry Rabinowitz — along with others like Shulumu in Colombia and Linda in Oklahoma — get the same advice: first find the cause of your sciatica, then consider the suggestions given above to RNC71.

Unfortunately, Cate in NY, who also has sciatica and a herniated disk, cannot do either forward or backward bends. But she can do sideways poses like vasisthasana (side plank), which we have shown with M.R.I.s to reduce stenosis and herniated discs. Also, she may be pushing too hard; she should consider trying the poses that used to make her feel good — but only 10 percent of the way — until she feels stronger. Start back bends very slowly. Self-pacing is a critical part of any self-discipline, and applies to all parts of yoga, from beginning to end.

*Q. At a healthy 61, I took up Iyengar yoga last year with an experienced teacher and felt better and limber than I had in my whole life. Six months later, I experienced low back pain and sciatica. I have a L4-5 and L5 - S1 disk bulge. I had physical therapy and two epidural steroid injections. The pain and numbness is only marginally better and has kept me from yoga, which I miss greatly. I don’t think I overdid yoga. My doctors think I will recover slowly. Is there remedial yoga for sciatica, and what is the best way to get back to yoga once I am better? — DGR, Ann Arbor*

A. DGR, with bulging discs, is inhibited from back bends by a yoga-phobic physician. But back bends will very likely help. Find one of the excellent Iyengar teachers in Ann Arbor and you will likely benefit from the locust, the bridge and the camel, among others. Again, progress slowly.

**JOINT PAIN AND METABOLISM**

*Q. I am 58 and a breast cancer survivor. I have been doing vinyasa yoga for about five years. In the last two years, I have had problems with my sacroliliac joint and I understand this may be the result of too much flexibility in the hip joint. In addition, I am interested in whether yoga can slow the metabolism. I would greatly appreciate advice on protecting the sacroiliac and whether the metabolism issue is a myth. Thanks. — MR New York, Port Washington, N.Y.*

**A.**Both MR and a yoga teacher in Boston asked about sacroiliac joint pain. For those with this problem, I describe some unusual but easy versions of difficult poses, like the two-armed support in peacock, in the new edition of “Yoga for Back Pain,” which I wrote with Carol Ardman. Also helpful is the eagle, the cow and “leaning” as described in an earlier book, “Low Back Pain.”

Several people, including MR, have asked whether yoga slows metabolism. Yes, it does. It lowers blood pressure and reduces atrial fibrillation and in general calms things down. But that does not mean yoga cannot be used to trim your weight. Yoga does it differently, by stretching the organ, the stomach, which will then send turn-off signals to the appetite centers in the brain. Poses like the warrior III, the twisted janu sirsasana, and parivrtta parsvakonasana, done 10 to 20 minutes before a meal, will probably work. This requires a small amount of self-discipline, but then again, so does just about anything that succeeds.

May 15, 2013

**Advice on Practicing Yoga in Middle Age, Part 2**

**By THE NEW YORK TIMES**

This is the second set of answers to reader questions from [Dr. Loren Fishman](http://sciatica.org/about/loren.html), a back-pain and rehabilitative medicine specialist who has long incorporated yoga into patient care. In 1972, before applying to medical school, he studied yoga with B.K.S. Iyengar for a year in Pune, India. Dr. Fishman is the medical director of [Manhattan Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation](http://www.manhattanphysicalmedicine.com/doctors.html) in New York City, an assistant clinical professor at Columbia Medical School and an associate editor of the journal Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation. He is also an author of eight books, including “[Yoga for Osteoporosis](http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=8588): the Complete Guide.”

Here is [part one of his responses](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/booming/advice-on-practicing-yoga-in-middle-age-part-1.html?ref=booming). A third and final set will appear on [Booming](http://www.nytimes.com/booming) next week. More than 100 readers [submitted questions about aging and yoga;](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/01/booming/yoga-for-the-middle-aged-questions.html)because of the volume, not all could be answered. *Some questions have been edited for length, and new questions are no longer being accepted.*

**FIRST, A THANK YOU**

To everyone who asked me questions, thank you. Many people start doing yoga when they are young. There is also a large group who begin doing yoga after 50, who become enthusiasts and continue for the rest of their lives. I think yoga is a perfect match for us as we grow older, because it’s no-impact, good for flexibility, balance, coordination, strength and attitude. Answering your diverse, intelligent questions has given me new ideas for research into the fascinating topic of yoga for those over 50.

**OSTEOPOROSIS**

*Q. What about yoga for osteoporosis. I’m 65, have been doing yoga for 20-plus years, and continue to do forward bends, plow, shoulder stand and twists, all presumably not O.K. for osteoporosis. I’m just at the line at 2.5 dexa. I don’t want to give up these postures if I don’t have to. What’s the risk? — Cat, NYC*

*Q. Hi, Loren. Please share your thoughts on the almost universal advice given to older people with bone density issues that they should avoid any kind of spinal flexion altogether. Clearly, there is a difference between spinal flexion as a normal range of motion that is necessary to do daily movements like tying your shoes, and a “loaded” lumbar flexion that occurs in a pose like halasana, or even a standing forward bending movement with the arms extended from the body. I have seen many people who have been trained to fear fracturing their spines in normal ranges of motion, and they impose tension and restrictions on their movement and breathing that actually worsens their condition.— Leslie Kaminoff, New York City*

*Q. I used to practice yoga but I found out from a Dexa scan that I have osteoporosis of the spine and although I have not had any fragility fractures I’m concerned about any forward bending or twisting just in the course of every day activities. It’s affecting the quality of my life because I’m thinking about osteoporosis every time I move. It would be wonderful to have some practical guidelines. Thank you. — Maracache, California*

**A.**On Sciatica.org I discuss [12 poses that can be used to prevent and treat osteoporosis and osteopenia](http://sciatica.org/yoga/12poses.html).

Many readers wrote in with questions about osteoporosis. Cat in NYC and Mellieone in New Zealand have osteoporosis, and have been doing all the poses that they’ve been told not to: Cat does forward bends, the plow, shoulder stand and twists. Mellieone’s regimen is similar, and neither of them have any pain. Diane in West Hartford and Nancy B from Maryland find that even gentle yoga gives their osteoporotic backs considerable pain. Maracache in California and Leslie Kaminoff in New York want clarification: surely we all have to bend forward, so what are people with osteoporosis supposed to do?

Mehrsheed Sinaki from the Mayo Clinic showed long ago that forward bending does produce more osteoporotic spinal fractures. Once you have one fracture, your spine is inclined even more forward, and the risk of a second fracture is even higher. These fractures are not life threatening, but they are usually quite painful. And a second fracture raises the likelihood of a third.

So forward bends should be done only with a straight back, or, if you’re not confident you can do that, stick with Supta Padangusthasana: lying on your back and raising your straight legs as far as possible. Your back will stay straight, thanks to gravity and the good carpenter that made the floor, but you’ll get all the benefits of a forward bend, and some of the good that comes with inversion.

Twists are a different matter, in fact, just the opposite. Many yoga practitioners, including excellent ones like Sara Meeks and Carole Krucoff, caution against doing twists if you have osteoporosis, but the only research papers addressing this in the literature that I have found actually say the opposite: that they are safer than forward bends.

I recommend going along with the literature. But there is another reason not to avoid twisting:

If you think about it, there are very few other ways to strengthen the vertebral bodies. In a clinical trial I am conducting to examine the possible benefits of yoga for osteoporosis, more than 500 people have used my 12-minute DVD with what I consider safe and helpful yoga poses for osteoporosis. This amounts to over 60,000 hours of people, mainly with osteoporosis or osteopenia, doing three twists, without even one report of a fracture. I repeat, there are no reports of fractures. Many of these people have before-and-after X-rays of the spine that have, at least so far, revealed no new fractures either. This is important because in spite of their often painful nature, some vertebral fractures are “silent.” So twists appear to be safe, provided you keep your back straight. Of course, until the trial is over no definitive conclusions can be stated, but the data so far are promising.

Yoga does not necessarily prevent bone loss altogether. Irene of the Connecticut Valley, who wrote in, is also in our study, and although 80 percent of the people reporting so far have gained bone after two years, she has lost a little in the spine, and held her own (without medicines) in the hip. My criterion for success in the study is no fractures of any kind. A person's bone mineral density (usually measured through a DEXA scan, which is something like an X-ray)is well correlated with fractures, but is not the same thing: fractures are also reduced by better balance, improved strength, greater range of motion, enhanced coordination and lower anxiety, all of which are produced by yoga, not medicine. No medicine can do that. There are medicines that lower anxiety, but they impair balance. For more information about my study, go to [sciatica.org](http://sciatica.org/).

**SHOULDER PAIN**

*Q. Four months ago I also hurt my shoulders doing the plank pose into downward dog. Even if I kneel into the plank position first, then go to DD, I reinjure my shoulders. Warrior poses are not as painful. Should I avoid planks/downward dog poses in the sun salutation sequence? — BeauJoe Lais, California*

**A**. Several readers (including Janine K from Seattle and Crone from Oregon) asked about shoulder pain. Downward Dog can be particularly dangerous to shoulders. That’s true even if you have a good teacher. So avoid doing it if you have a shoulder injury. Also avoid plank pose, and the crocodile, Chattaranga.

The triangular forearm support, the headstand and variations, however, [can be used to end shoulder pain](http://journals.lww.com/topicsingeriatricrehabilitation/Abstract/2011/04000/Yoga_Based_Maneuver_Effectively_Treats_Rotator.10.aspx) for people with rotator cuff tears by training the subscapularis muscle to take over for the supraspinatus. This [relatively simple solution](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/loren-fishman-md/yoga-for-rotator-cuff-injury_b_916728.html) has helped many of my patients avoid a costly, painful and unnecessary surgery.

**REGAINING RANGE OF MOTION**

*Q. At 5 feet 10 inches tall, 165 pounds and 57 years old, all of my previous exercise regimens (tackle football as a youth and through high school, long-distance bicycling and running), before becoming a professional desk jockey, have formed me into a hunched-over hulk with a variety of injuries resulting from the imbalances imputed by those practices. Currently, muscle and joint tightness keeps me from the level of yoga I desire (I’d like to be able to do a decent forward fold and cobra). . . . All of my back bend-related asanas (cobra, sphinx, up dog, bridge, etc.) are extremely shallow. Enduring discomfort as a part of a method to increase the range of motion limits of these asanas would not be a problem for me, nor would specific strength training exercises, if they were recommended, but I have not been successful in finding a resource I can trust. With professionally modified yoga practice, can one expect to reverse the effects of a lifetime of debilitating physicality and regain significant loss in vertebral column range of motion? — Roe Bear Toe, Cedar Rapids, Iowa*

**A**. Roe Bear Toe in Iowa, as you get older, your intervertebral discs gradually convert some of their water content, into fat, which limits their flexibility some. Otherwise tight ligaments, shortened tendons, stiff muscles and slumpy posture will all yield to gentle pervasive yoga poses and related maneuvers. One other caveat: men injure themselves more than women, largely, I believe, because they pit their greater strength against their lesser flexibility and end up hurting themselves. So reserve the might of the high school tackle for other things, and do the yoga to gain self-control, not to lose it.

**OVERWEIGHT BUT INTERESTED**

*Q. I am extremely overweight, age 56, 270 pounds, 5 feet 6 inches tall. How should I start practicing yoga? Other than the weight I am well. I have done yoga in the past. I practiced along with a TV show (Lilias) when I was much younger and I was the proper weight, 135 pounds. I enjoyed it. I worry about the weight because everywhere I look the people doing yoga are very thin and seem to already be in shape! In the Times photo with this article everyone is tiny! I guess what I am really asking is, are there special instructions/programs for the obese starting out in yoga? — Rational Reformer, Oklahoma*

**A.** There is no special instruction for overweight beginners, apart from being careful not to injure your ankles, knees and hips and the upper extremities. As your weight increases, the area of your feet and the joints of your lower extremities do not. So there are more pounds-per-square-inch in all these places. The joints of the upper extremities have no menisci, no extra padding of the kind you find in the knees. This may be because of their not usually being weight-bearing in human beings. In yoga, though, there are many poses in which the hands, wrists, elbows and shoulders do bear weight. This makes things easier on the legs and feet, but these are reasons to be especially careful of the more delicate joints above.

As William J. Broad points out in his book, [“The Science of Yoga,”](http://williamjbroad.com/the-science-of-yoga/)yoga lowers metabolism, which does not bode well for weight-watchers. But yoga can promote weight loss by stretching the organ, the stomach, that sends “satiety” signals to the appetite centers in the brain. Parsvakonasana (side angle pose), paschimottanasana (extreme forward bend) and matsyendrasana (a twist) all do this, each in a different plane.

**MISCELLANY**

*Q. Great article but you left one name out: Larry Payne’s Prime of Life Yoga of*[*http://www.samata.com*](http://www.samata.com/)*. Larry has been promoting this style of yoga for the past 10 years. He is currently teaching at Loyola Marymount in California and is well respected around the world. — Lisa, Austin, Tex.*

**A.**Larry Payne should not be neglected, Lisa. He has helped many people and has been a potent influence in bringing yoga therapy to where it is today, and where it is headed tomorrow.

*Q. I am a 50-year-old former professional dancer and current fitness instructor (water, stretch, dance). I am interested in going through a yoga teacher training program, but don’t know how to go about deciding between different programs. I feel my interests lie primarily in teaching older students with more of an emphasis on health, fitness and therapeutic value. Any insights for me? — SH, Chicago*

**A.**Again, I recommend B.K.S. Iyengar’s methods. Many former dancers gravitate to Iyengar yoga because it is rigorous, classical, and precise, with an emphasis on alignment. Also the former Anusara program is good, as is Integral Yoga.

*Next week, Dr. Fishman will respond to questions about headstands and glaucoma risk, poses to improve balance and other questions.*

*Previous Ask an Expert columns can be*[*found here.*](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/booming/columns/ask_an_expert/index.html)

*Booming: Living Through the Middle Ages offers news and commentary about baby boomers, anchored by*[*Michael Winerip*](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/michael_winerip/index.html?8qa)*. You can follow Booming via*[*RSS here*](http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/nyt/Booming.xml)*or visit*[*nytimes.com/booming*](http://www.nytimes.com/booming)*. You can reach us by e-mail at**booming@nytimes.com**.*

*PART ONE:*

*http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/booming/advice-on-practicing-yoga-in-middle-age-part-1.html?ref=askanexpert&pagewanted=print*

*More answers will be posted on Booming next week. Previous Ask an Expert columns can be*[*found here.*](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/booming/columns/ask_an_expert/index.html)

*Booming: Living Through the Middle Ages offers news and commentary about baby boomers, anchored by*[*Michael Winerip*](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/michael_winerip/index.html?8qa)*. You can follow Booming via*[*RSS here*](http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/nyt/Booming.xml)*or visit*[*nytimes.com/booming*](http://www.nytimes.com/booming)*. You can reach us by e-mail at**booming@nytimes.com**.*