Twisting

Description

Vocabulary

ardha matsyendrasana, *bharadvajasana*, *jathara parivartanasana*, *marichyasana III*, *paripurna matsyendrasana, parivrtta parsvakonasana*, *parivrtta trikonasana*, twisting poses

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1. **ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA** â?? Half Lord of the Fishes Pose
2. **BHARADVAJASANA** â?? Bharadvaja Sage Twist
3. **JATHARA PARIVARTANASANA** â?? Revolved Abdomen Pose / Reclined Twist
4. **MARICHYASANA III** â?? Marichiâ??s Pose Twist
5. **PARIPURNA MATSYENDRASANA** â?? Complete Lord of the Fishes Pose
6. **PARIVRTTA PARSVAKONASANA** â?? Revolved Side Angle Pose
7. **PARIVRTTA TRIKONASANA** â?? Revolved Triangle Pose
8. **TWISTING POSES** â?? Asanas that rotate the spine

Introduction

Twisting poses rotate the spine.

- In some twisting *asanas* such as a Reclined Twist, the arms and shoulders are acting separately from the pelvis. In other poses such as *Ardha Matsyendrasna* (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose), the arms are used as leverage, leading to a stronger rotation of the spine and shoulders.
- Because the SI joint is a joint of stability â?? not mobility â?? consider focusing on keeping the sacrum and pelvic bones together and allowing the pelvis to move during twists. (See much more detail below.)

Types of twists include: 1) standing, 2) supine, 3) seated, 4) arm balance, and 5) twisted inversions. See more on each below.

Standing Twists

A person doing yogaDescription automatically generated with medium confidence

Examples: Prasarita Twist, Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle), Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (Revolved Side Angle), Parivrtta Ardha Chandrasana (Revolved Half Moon), Parivrtta Hasta Padangusthasana (Revolved Hand to Foot)

Supine Twists

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- As Olga Kabel notes here, Reclined Twist can be varied to emphasize stretching neck, shoulders and upper back or on stretching and strengthening hips, backs and legs
- Examples: Jathara Parivartanasana (Revolved Abdomen) with one or both legs; legs straight or bent knees, Eagle legs

Seated Twists

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Examples: Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes), Seated Twist, Bharadvajasana, Marichyasana III, Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana (Revolved Head to Knee), Parivrtta Upavistha Konasana (Revolved Seated Wide Angle)

Arm Balancing Twists

Examples: Dwi Pada Koundinyasana, Eka Pada Koundinyasana, Parsva Bakasana (Side Crow), and Visvamitrasana (Flying Warrior)

Twisting Inversions

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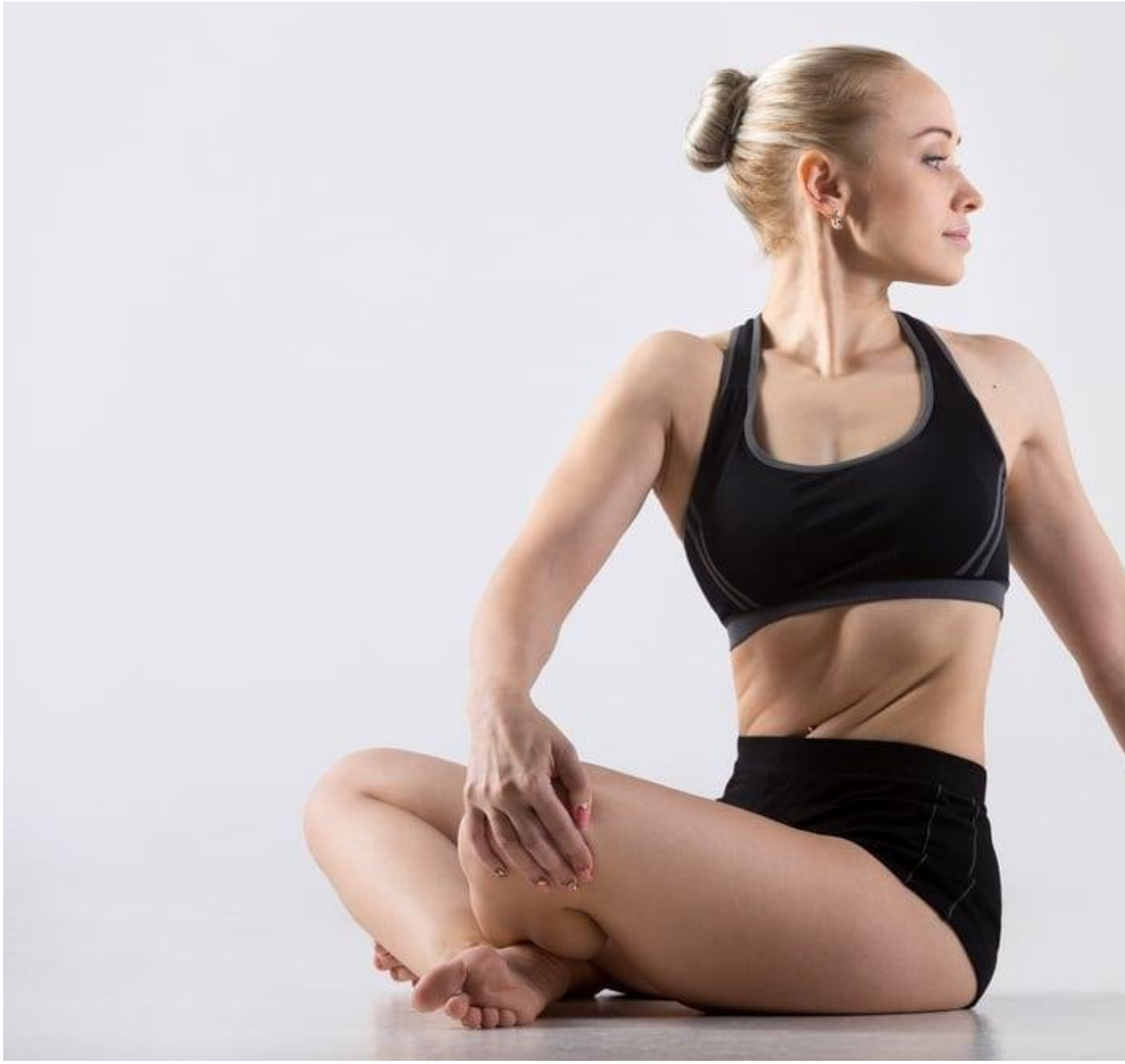
Examples: Parsva Halasana (Sideways Plow), Parsva Sarvangasana (Sideways Shoulderstand), Parsvaikapada Sarvangasana (One Leg Sideways Shoulderstand)

DIFFERENT TYPES OF TWISTS LEAD TO DIFFERENT EFFECTS

Twists express themselves in a variety of forms â?? seated, prone, forward bends, inversions â?? and with each, we change the internal and structural effects. â?? Rama Jyoti Vernon

Different forms and foundations lead to different experiences and effects. Of course, this is true with every type of *asana* category; forward bending will be experienced differently from a seat vs an inversion, for example. It may be particularly key to dig into how these differences manifest in different people during twisting. The amount of torque obviously changes the experience (such as in *Ardha Matsyendrasana* vs a gentle reclined twist), but so does twisting with the legs wide (as in *Prasarita Padottanasana* and *Upavistha Konasana*) vs twisting from *Utkatasana*, for example.

Effects & Benefits



Twists are an excellent way to target multiple tissues throughout the body. They also offer a chance to explore expansive breathwork within constriction and often challenge balance and stability. â?? Leah Sugerman

Physical Effects

1. Increases spinal mobility and range of motion. Specifically, muscles involved in twisting include internal and external obliques, multifidus, spinal erectors, and intercostals.
2. Another contributor to ROM is the connective tissue around abdominal organs. If connective tissue becomes stiff, it can â??limit movement and pliability and can hinder organsâ?? function. A great way to keep your organs squishy and pliable is to give them visceral massage with deep

diaphragmatic breathing and twisting yoga poses.â?• (Olga Kabel)
3. Increases circulation in spine; lubricates spinal discs*, keeping them healthier.
4. Aligns spine. Specifically, realigns the relationship between the shoulder girdle and the spine, and between the pelvic girdle and the spine. Returns spine to neutral alignment after deep forward bends and backbends.
5. Stimulates spinal bones to be stronger. (Baxter Bell MD)
6. Strengthens muscles alongside spine, leading to improved posture and overall spinal health + good functioning of the nerves. (Baxter Bell MD) Only twists effectively stretch the deepest layer of back muscles closest to the spine. (Roger Cole)
7. Tones abdominal region, particularly the obliques.
8. Improves digestion.
9. Said to â??cleanseâ?• the internal organs via a â??squeeze and soakâ?• effect as with the wringing of a sponge.
10. Contributes to brain health due to the action of crossing the midline of the body. (Baxter Bell MD)

* â??The discs wedged between your vertebrae are dependent on movement for circulation. The discs are avascular, which means they donâ??t get direct blood supply. Instead, they rely on a mechanism called â??imbibing,â?? in which the changing pressures around the discs cause them to drink up or take in nearby fluids. This fluid is what keeps the discs healthy and plump (think the opposite of degenerative discs) and creates separation between the vertebrae for range of motion. Twists are the perfect way to shift pressure through the discs and help support this process.â?? (Tiffany Cruikshank)

ANATOMY OF VERTEBRAE & RIBS AFFECT TWISTING ROM

Each individual vertebra meets the next vertebra, both above and below, at what is called a facet joint. In the thoracic spine, the shape of the facets and the orientation of the facet joints is so that they are essentially parallel to your back. That means a lot of rotation, or twisting, is possible there. Additionally, in the thoracic spine, the spinous processes are arranged with enough space between them so we can rotate without the spinous processes bumping into one another. This is not true of the lumbar spine. In the lumbar spine, the facet joints are oriented in a way that they quickly begin to bump into each other if we try to rotate much through that section of the spineâ?¦ Another important point to keep in mind is that, in the thoracic spine where we do most of our twisting, each of the vertebra is attached to a pair of ribs. The ribs, of course, are a fairly rigid bony structureâ?¦. [And] the fibers of the intercostal muscles run at an angle between each ribâ?¦ If our intercostal muscles are tight, they can restrict our ability to twist. â?? David Keil

RELIEVE LOW BACK PAIN

When done properly, twists have the potential to help your low back feel great. Twisting can activate the muscles around the lumbar spine and abdominal core, increasing stability as well as blood flow and oxygenation to the area. â?? Ray Long MD

ROM NEEDED FOR EVERYDAY MOVEMENT

I suggest you take one day to consciously observe how many times you twist your head, rotate your chest, or twist in any fashion while lying in bed, sitting in a chair or in your car, or when you are upright.

It will be a lot! So, I believe that aging well includes maintaining your ability to twist your spine, even in the face of changes to the spine and soft tissues around itâ??changes that for some could start to limit your normal range of motion if not proactively addressed. â?? Baxter Bell MD

ADDRESS LOSS OF RANGE OF MOTION

Unfortunately, many people lose full spinal rotation in the course of living a sedentary lifestyle. Some losses can occur if joints fuse due to trauma, surgery, or arthritis, but most range of motion loss comes from the shortening of soft tissues. If you donâ??t lengthen the muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia (connective tissues) to their full length at least a few times a week, they will gradually shorten and limit the nearby jointâ??s mobility. If you regularly practice yoga twists, not only do you maintain the normal length and resilience of the soft tissues, but you also help to maintain the health of the discs and facet joints. â?? Julie Gudmestad

SPACE FOR NERVES

Our nerves and nerve roots stem from the spinal cord and disperse throughout the body, and when the vertebrae are â??compressed,â?• they impinge on the nerves and nerve roots causing pain. Strengthening your spinal muscles by engaging in eccentric contraction (when the muscles are lengthening while contracted) versus concentric contraction (shortening of the muscles during contraction) during twisted poses, gives you the ability to create a stable space for the nerves to extend out from the spinal column between the vertebrae. â?? Tina Templeman

REALIGN RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN APPENDICULAR & AXIAL SKELETONS

Every time you twist your body to the right, your right shoulder blade moves closer toward the spine, contracting the muscles that bind it to the ribcage and spine. At the same time the left shoulder blade moves further away from the spine, stretching the muscles that bind it to the rib cage and spine. In most twists you keep one hip flexed and adducted (the leg is folded in toward the midline of the body), which means that the muscles on the inside of the hip will contract, and the muscles on the outside will stretch. Alternately contracting and stretching the muscles that bind the shoulder girdle and the pelvic girdle to the spine helps realign the relationship between the appendicular skeleton and the axial skeleton. This is important because in the body it is all about the relationship between different parts. â?? Olga Kabel

STIMULATE CIRCULATION, REFRESHING ORGANS & GLANDS

Iyengar describes twists as a â??squeeze-and-soakâ?? action: The organs are compressed during a twist, pushing out blood filled with metabolic by-products and toxins. When we release the twist, fresh blood flows in, carrying oxygen and the building blocks for tissue healing. So, from the physiological standpoint, twists stimulate circulation and have a cleansing and refreshing effect on the torso organs and associated glands. â?? Julie Gudmestad

Energetic Effects

1. Releases tension.
2. Said to balance nervous system â?? calming when feeling agitated; stimulating when feeling lethargic.
3. Said to provide an overall â??cleansingâ?• effect as a result of stimulating the abdominal organs.
4. Brings sense that itâ??s okay to let go.
5. Known to release frustration, anxiety, fear.
6. May cause an initial sense of irritation before a feeling of clarity.

A DEEP RENEWAL

In the depth of the twist, and after releasing the pose, observe how delicious it is to let your brain relax into the back of your skull, to let yourself be led instead of forcefully leading. Practice twists anytime you feel distracted, anxious, fatigued, or agitated, for a deep renewal of body and spirit. â?? Denise Benitez

A VALUABLE ASPECT OF ASANA PRACTICE

In almost every class I teach, when I ask what people in the class would like to focus on, twists are high on the listâ?¦ Spinal rotation often feels like a remedy for whatever ails us. Why do people love twists so much? I speculate that one reason is that we just donâ??t have that many opportunities to rotate our spines in daily lifeâ?¦ For the most part, we keep our bodies in the sagittal plane. So twisting feels like a refreshing change. â?? Charlotte Bell

ENERGETICALLY BALANCING

All twists â?? seated, reclining, or taken as inversions â?? are excellent for balancing *samana prana*, the energy of the navel center that controls digestion and the digestive organs. If the twist can be felt all the way down to the base of the pubis and tailbone, it will also regulate *apana prana* which is responsible for the elimination of bodily waste. â?? Rama Jyoti Vernon

Contraindications & Cautions

Contraindications

Twists not recommended when students are experiencing the following:

- Arthritis of the spine with symptoms that worsen with twisting*
- Disc issues that worsen with twisting*
- Pregnancy (deep or closed twists contraindicated; â??open twistsâ?• okay)
- Sacroiliac (SI) joint pain, that is active
- Spinal stenosis with symptoms that worsen with twisting*

*Per Baxter Bell MD here.

Gentle Twists Advised

In that same article referred to above, Baxter Bell MD advises that students with the following conditions avoid deep twists and practice only gentle twists:

- Digestive / Gastrointestinal Issues with symptoms that worsen with twisting
- High Blood Pressure, untreated
- Low Back Pain
- Osteopenia & Osteoporosis
- Scoliosis â?? Follow the scoliosis protocol of practicing differently on each side according to particular case

Important: SI Joints in Twisting

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Executive Summary

1. The hip bones and sacrum are held together by the SI joints.
2. If the pelvis is held stable and the SI joints take on some of the twisting action (which is never the intention but seems to happen nonetheless), the SI joints can be stressed.
3. To prevent this, consider: 1) Always thinking about keeping the sacrum and hip bones together. 2) Using leg (not pelvis) as the anchor in twists. 3) Allowing the pelvis to first move when twisting, and then moving the spine.

SI JOINTS INVOLVED IN EVERY YOGA POSE

The sacroiliac joint (SI joint) is involved in literally every yoga pose we practice. It is the hub for the transference of force between the legs and torso. â?? Ray Long, MD

SI JOINTS TRANSFER LOAD & DISTRIBUTE FORCES

The SI joints serve to transfer the load of the upper body to the lower body, as well as to distribute forces moving up the body from below. Therefore, stability is built into their very design so that these forces can be transferred efficiently through the pelvis. In fact, the SI joints are so inherently stable that there is only the tiniest amount of movement available at these joints. â?? Jenni Rawlings

The Potential Issue with Twists

In Understanding Your Sacroiliac Joint, Judith Lasater describes how twisting can be one of the major culprits of sacroiliac (SI) joint pain.

- Two sacroiliac joints connect the sacrum to the hip bone (ilium) on each side of the body. When the spine rotates, one side of the sacrum can be pulled forward of the other which can increase the space in the SI joint on one side while decreasing it on the other.
- For those with mobility in the sacroiliac joints, this can be problematic over time.

CHARLOTTE BELL OFFERS A CLEAR TEACHING ON THIS POTENTIAL ISSUE

Itâ??s important to understand where rotation actually takes place in the spine. A popular alignment â??ruleâ?• instructs you to keep your hips squared while twisting in order to create more of a twist in the lumbar spine. Unfortunately, because the facet joints in the lumbar spine prevent that section of the spine from twisting more than about 5 degrees, the result of this action, over time, is to cause the sacroiliac (SI) joint to bear the twist. Rotation of the sacroiliac joint can, over time, destabilize the joint and cause dysfunction, which can cause a number of painful conditions, including sciatica. The thoracic spine, the part of the spine connected to the ribcage, is designed for rotation. So when you twist, keep in mind that this is where you should focus your efforts. Rather than keeping the pelvis squared in twists, allow it to move in the direction of your intended rotation, while focusing the twist in the thoracic spine. â?? Charlotte Bell

More Detail

When the pelvis is anchored, the twisting must come solely from the spine. In reality, however, the sacrum may be dragged into the twist with the rest of the spine. In this case, the hip bones are being held back while the sacrum is potentially being pulled out of alignment with them, into the direction of the spine.

- There is extra force when, for example, the arm is used as leverage in some twists. In such cases, the potential for overstretching the sacral ligaments increases.
- Repeatedly practicing in this way may stretch the sacral ligaments that are holding the pelvis and sacrum together. Students who have experienced SI joint issues often report that no pain was experienced for some period of time and then at some point, there was SI joint pain.
- SI dysfunction and pain is defined as a condition in which an SI joint is not in its neutral, stable position.

Always Move Pelvis and Sacrum Together

Judith Lasater and many other teachers encourage students to always endeavor to move the pelvis and sacrum together. This is applied in twisting in such a way as to allow the pelvis to move with the spinal rotation rather than anchoring and moving the spine independently.

A great way to practice how this feels in the body is to keep a block between the thighs when practicing Reclined Twist, for example.

GIVING UP THE â??SQUARE THE HIPSâ?• FOR â??MOVE SACRUM & PELVIS TOGETHERâ?•

I was always told to imagine balancing a teacup on my pelvis while rotating my spine in revolved standing posturesâ?¦ Then I met my current teacher, who suffered from sacroiliac joint pain for over 30 yearsâ?¦ The only thing that relieved my teacherâ??s SI joint pain was *unsquaring* her hips during twisting *asanas*. So I began to explore this conceptâ?¦ Despite the fact that we are often encouraged to twist from the navel up â?? since the thoracic and cervical vertebrae allow for the greatest range of rotation â?? I donâ??t think itâ??s actually possible to *completely* isolate the thoracic spine during a twist without bringing some of that rotation throughout the entire spineâ?¦ When we fixâ?¦ the hipsâ?¦

and rotate the spine (including the sacrum)â?¦ we are forcing the sacrum and ilia in opposite directionsâ?¦ While it may not feel painful to do this, it can lead to SI joint instability over time. Now when I practice twists, I allow my hips to rotate with my spine so that the sacrum and pelvis move together; as a teacher, I encourage my students to do the same. â?? Leah Sugerman

ALLOWING PELVIS TO ROTATE

Despite decades of teachers cautioning their students to square their hips to the front of the room in twisting poses such as Revolved Side Angle, Revolved Triangle, and Chair Twist, Magone says your hips donâ??t actually need to be squared. In fact, the motion creates torque, he says, which weakens the space between the hips and the torso and ups your odds of injury. Instead of trying to stay square, allow your pelvis to rotate in the same direction as your spine, which will allow for a much deeper spinal rotation and reduce the likelihood of lower-back pain. â?? Ryan Peacock

TWIST PELVIS FIRST, SPINE SECOND

While I agree that every *asana* needs an anchor, in twisting poses the anchor is not the pelvis â?? instead, itâ??s the thigh, and the foot that is on the floor. The most important thing to remember about the SI joint is that it is a joint of stability, not mobility. If the pelvis is allowed or encouraged to twist first, followed by the spine twisting second, the SI joint will be much happier. The key to protecting the SI jointâ?¦ is this: Always move the pelvis and sacrum together. As our present-day understanding of anatomy continues to evolve, many teachers have adopted this principle in twisting, despite the traditional concepts of â??anchoringâ?• the pelvis to facilitate a deeper twist. â?? Jason Crandell

WHEN ACTIVE SI PAIN HAS DIMINISHED, USE THESE GUIDELINES FOR TWISTING

Once [active SI pain has diminished], use the following guidelines to minimize the risk of the SI strain in twists: Limit the number of twists in a practice. Make sure to balance out and stabilize the sacrum at the beginning and the end of the practice by doing Bhujangasana at the beginning and Vimanasana [Viniyoga leg flow that is a variation of Sphinx Pose in a flow] toward the end. Choose twists where the legs are kept parallel to each other or together, rather then one foot folding over the other â?? this will minimize the pull on the SI ligament. â?? Olga Kabel

Digging Deeper into Related Considerations

The potential for overstretching the sacral ligaments (when repeatedly practicing in a way that pulls the sacrum away from the hip bones) has become more widely understood, due in great part to reports from yogis (such as here) indicating that SI joint issues seem more common among long-time yogis than others â?? and that at least some of them experience relief when they ensure they keep the pelvis and sacrum together and allow the pelvis to move when twisting.

In this 2020 article, the experienced Ashtanga teacher and anatomy expert, David Keil, echoes the advice for those with SI joint issues to move the pelvis and sacrum together. However, unlike other writings we viewed on this subject, he didnâ??t agree that keeping the pelvis square while twisting is universally risky to the SI joints. As we considered Keilâ??s comment, we mused about what might support his position. Here are some thoughts:

1. **Women Are More Susceptible to SI Issues** â?? Women are more susceptible to sacroiliac trouble than men because: 1) The structure of the female pelvis makes the SI joint less stable, 2) Women tend to have more flexible ligaments than men, 3) Childbirth â??puts enormous strain on the SI jointsâ?• and 4) Athletic young women generally have more mobile SI joints than men in comparable condition. Perhaps the earliest teachers who popularized the cue to square the pelvis were men who were less likely to experience SI issues. And perhaps Keil has taught a greater proportion of men vs women students than the teachers who are finding SI joint issues to be more common.
2. **Presumptions, Implications & Realities** â?? It seems reasonable that the teaching to square the pelvis was IMPLYING that the pelvis and sacrum should always stay aligned and stable. The teaching was presumably focused on the fact that twists are designed for the spine, not the pelvis. HOWEVER, if students DO tend to drag the sacrum along with the spine while also endeavoring to keep the hips stable, then they are pulling some parts of their spine and sacrum one way and some the other way â?? exactly what the modern teachers are saying. When this is a possibility, allowing the pelvis to move should indeed remove the potential ligament stress. And if after moving the pelvis, the student then focuses on the twist in the spine, she should be optimizing the pose for its intended purposes without incurring undue risk.
3. **If Twisting with a Square Pelvis Hasnâ??t Caused Problems, Why Not?** â?? We canâ??t know for sure how Keil has come to his perspective that a square pelvis in twisting isnâ??t inherently harmful, but a hypothesis could be that he has been able to ensure his students focus their twists in the spine without undue pulling on the sacral ligaments.*
4. **Choosing the Anchor & Moving Pelvis, Then Spine** â?? We might consider Jason Crandellâ??s comment about twists to be an excellent approach: 1) Use the leg (not pelvis) as the anchor, and 2) move the pelvis first and then the spine.

*Based on the teaching below, Judith Lasater doesnâ??t seem to agree that itâ??s possible to both square the hips and twist without stressing the sacral ligaments. We know that the hip bones and sacrum should stay aligned in anything we do, and we know that the one place this can be most tricky is in twisting. Thus, as an anatomy expert, woman and long-time yogi and teacher, it seems best to allow the pelvis to move in twists.

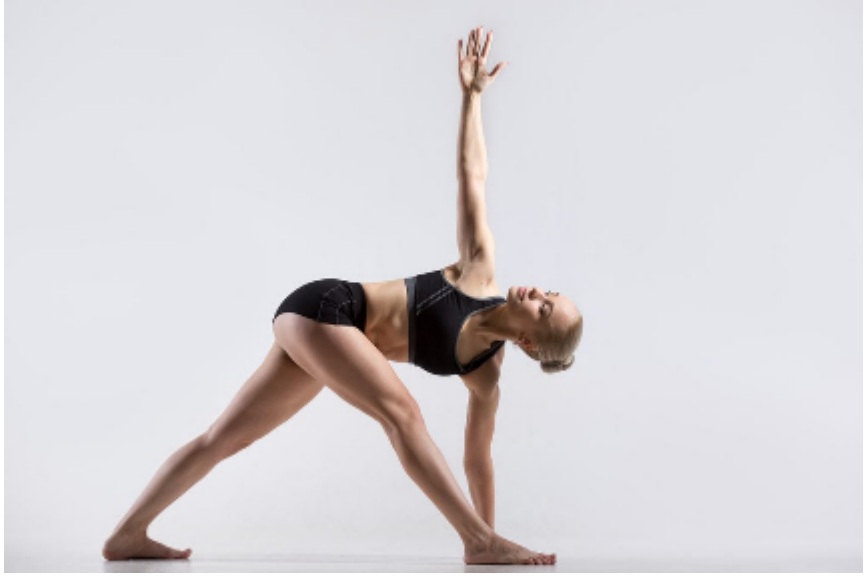
When you anchor your pelvis and twist your spine, you are rotating the spine in one direction and the pelvis in the other. You are stressing the sacroiliac ligaments, likely overstretching them in an attempt to twist moreâ?¦ Imagine the anchor of the pose is not the pelvis or sitting bones, but the very top of your left thigh [in *Bharadvajasana* when twisting chest to the left], where it meets your abdomen. Anchoring from there, exhale and twist by moving the pelvis over your hip jointsâ?¦ Your right buttock may also lift slightly, but that is actually part of the pose as long as you are moving the hip sockets around and over the femoral (thigh bone) heads and creating the movement from the hip joints. Now, your pelvis is moving with the spinal column, not in the opposite direction. â?? Judith Hanson Lasater

Recap of Summary

1. The hip bones and sacrum are held together by the SI joints.
2. If the pelvis is held stable and the SI joints take on some of the twisting action (which is never the intention but seems to happen nonetheless), the SI joints can be stressed.

3. To prevent this, consider: 1) Always thinking about keeping the sacrum and hip bones together. 2) Using leg (not pelvis) as the anchor in twists. 3) Allowing the pelvis to first move when twisting, and then moving the spine.

More on Form



Introduction

ALLOW OPENING TO HAPPEN

[Elise Miller noted,] â??You see people doing twists, and they just go for it. Then they feel stuck, like they have nowhere else to go â?? and they donâ??t, because they havenâ??t allowed an opening to happen.â?• Her remedy for this common problem is twofold: First, she says, you must elongate your spine and create space in it before twisting; otherwise you exert pressure on the disks and leave yourself open to injury. Second, she uses propsâ?¦ to gently prepare the body for deeper poses. â?? Andrea Ferretti

In the following 2-min video, Aadil Palkhivala demonstrates a seated twist, first in a collapsed expression and then a more optimum form, utilizing the principles of â??root, lift, twistâ?• to â??distribute the twist throughout the spine and bring a sense of joy.â?•

A person and a child doing yogaDescription automatically generated with low confidence

Judith Hanson Lasater suggests here, â??Many yoga instructors tell students to â??anchor the sitting bonesâ?? in seated twists. But the key to healthy twisting is moving your pelvis.â?•

As noted in the section above on SI joints, Jason Crandell seems to bridge the potential gap between these two perspectives with this: â??While I agree that every *asana* needs an anchor, in twisting poses the anchor is not the pelvis â?? instead, itâ??s the thigh, and the foot that is on the floor.â?•

Lengthen Side Waist, Lengthen Spine

- Keeping the spine long distributes the forces in the disks evenly.
- Depth in twisting is achieved by length.

DEPTH COMES FROM LENGTH

Depth in twisting *asanas* is achieved by creating length. â?? David Swenson

A LONG SPINE IN TWISTS DISTRIBUTES FORCES IN DISCS

Maintaining good posture, especially in seated twists, as well as any twists, distributes the forces in the discs in a more even and, hopefully, healthier way than, say, always being in a bit of forward bend (like a couple of my students who are professional gardeners) or a bit a backbend (like my contractor who painted the ceilings in my house one time). These folks may be at risk of spinal problems down the road. But their yoga practice could act as an antidote to some of those repetitive directions of movement their jobs require. â?? Baxter Bell MD

Control the Distribution of Work

- There is a tendency to avoid twisting where flexibility is limited (such as in the thoracic spine) and to overwork areas that twist more easily (such as the neck).
- Avoid initiating a twist from the head and neck and instead twist from the core, using abdominal and back muscles to turn the entire rib cage. Let the head and neck follow.

FOCUS ON UPPER BACK ROTATION & STABILIZE THE LOW BACK

When youâ??re upright, itâ??s more important to create active support around the abdominal wall for the spine and discs. Enter the transversus abdominis (TvA)â?¦ You can think of this as a layer of cling wrap around the waist, helping to draw the contents of the abdomen closer to the spine for more effective and efficient support and movement. One more thing to keep in mind with twists is that the lumbar spine doesnâ??t rotate a lot, especially compared to the nearby thoracic vertebrae which are meant to rotate. So for twisting poses, seek out the rotation in the upper back as you support and stabilize your low back. â?? Tiffany Cruikshank

WORK AREAS NORMALLY IGNORED

An important technique to learn for twists is an even distribution of the work requiredâ?¦ When you overwork an area that is already mobile and â??open,â?• you make it more vulnerable to injury. However, twists like *Parivrtta Trikonasana* can help you bring openness and awareness to the thoracic spine, which is often lethargic. â?? Natasha Rizopoulos

TURN FROM COREâ??NOT HEAD

When we initiate a twisting pose from the head and neck, the rest of the body does not necessarily follow. The result is a strained and incomplete action, and we may try to use our arms to force

ourselves deeper into the pose. An alternative approach is to twist from the core, using abdominal and back muscles to turn the entire rib cage. The head and neck follow, aligning the center, heart and gazeâ?¦ Give students the opportunity to feel [these] two different approaches to twisting. First, have them turn their heads as far as they can, and then try to â??catch upâ?• with the rest of the body by using their arms to pull or push themselves into the seated twist. Then have them initiate the same twisting pose from the core, with an exhalation, turning the torso before the head, and using the arms only to support themselves in the final position. Most students will agree that this last approach feels far better. â?? Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Breathe Mindfully

- Maintain a full and steady breath while twisting.
- Inhale: ground. Exhale: turn.

INHALE, GROUND, EXHALE, TURN

It is most important that the breath remain full and steady at all times in all twisting poses. Each inhale, ground and balance. Each exhale, straighten, lift, and turn the spine. â?? Dr. David Frawley

RELAXING & MINDFULLY BREATHING IN TWISTS STRETCHES INTERCOSTALS

When we twist, remember that our intercostal muscles are being lengthened by virtue of their attachment to the ribsâ?¦ At the same time, we are trying to use those muscles to assist with breathing. That asks for even more length to bring the ribs apart, making space for more breath. When we are breathing in twists, our abdomen is compressed to some degree. That forces more air upward into the chest and adds even more pressure into those intercostal musclesâ?¦ If your intercostal muscles are tight, then twisting itself will help to lengthen them. Adding some gentle amount of pressure from the breathing in twists will, over time, stretch them even more. The more you can relax while breathing, the more effective your stretch through the intercostals will be. And then, the more space theyâ??ll be able to create between the ribs over time. More space between the ribs means more room for air. â?? David Keil

More Considerations

- Use props to gently prepare the body for deeper poses.
- In an article about standing twists here, Ray Long MD points out that based on the way the skeleton is constructed, â??connecting the upper and lower extremities (the hand to the foot or elbow to the knee) can be used to influence the position of the trunk.â?•
- In an article on â??hands-freeâ?• twists here, Baxter Bell MD details the benefits of exploring the â??activeâ?• range of motion by practicing without using the hands to deepen the twist.
- More support: 9 Spinal Stretches to Ease Back Pain

HOLDING LONG ENOUGH

Twists are often not held long enough. They should stimulate a relaxation reflex. The release can occur as yawning, sighing, peristalsis moving the intestines, a call to the toilet, gastric reflux burps, a release

of pelvic gas, or even an emotional release. Yogis encourage natural reflexes to occur. â?? Mukunda Stiles

TWIST IMAGERY

Once youâ??ve settled into your deepest twist, imagine a swirling ribbon of satin beautifully winding its way around your spine. With your mindâ??s eye, trace that silky spiral from your tailbone all the way up into the sky so that your spine feels evenly stretched from bottom to top. Breathe gently, soften the inner organs, and enjoy the juicy vibrancy that Marichyasana III offers. â?? Claudia Cummins

Wisdom and Inspiration

WITH CARE, TWISTS CAN ALLEVIATE PAIN & DISCOMFORT

If youâ??ve ever experienced significant back pain, twists may be a group of yoga poses you shy away from, and rightfully so. I, too, used to feel nervous in twisting poses after a disc injury a dozen years ago. But after learning the power and potential of these yoga poses both in my own body and with the students and teachers I work with, Iâ??ve since shifted my approach. Much like any good medicine, twists need to be taken in the proper dosage. But Iâ??ve found that yoga â?? and twisting poses in particular â?? can alleviate back pain and discomfort when done correctly. â?? Tiffany Cruikshank

PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

If your masseuse, your shrink, and your yoga teacher ever got together, theyâ??d surely agree that you need twists. Your masseuse knows that your back muscles are tighter than the strings on a soprano ukulele; your shrink knows that half your tension comes from stress; and your teacher knows that twisting poses are often the best way to untie both physical & psychological knots. â?? Roger Cole

TURNING THE CONSCIOUS THINKING MIND TO LOOK INTO THE SHADOW

Twisting poses may bring up long-buried memories and dreams as they stimulate Svadhisthana (the second chakra) and Manipura (third chakra at the navel center), the center of sight and insight. Psychologically, when we twist, revolve, or evolve, we are taking the conscious mind and turning it back to look into the seat of the subconscious. I think of it as revolving the vrttis, the mind waves. In all twisting poses the front brain, the manas, conscious thinking mind, turns around to look into the shadow side of itself. It looks to the back body, which is the part we cannot see without physical eyes, symbolic of the citta, our subconscious mind as well as our intuition. As we [twist, we can]â?¦ transcend self-imposed limitations in mind, body and spirit. â?? Rama Jyoti Vernon

WHAT CAN HELP ME REMAIN CENTERED EVEN IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS?

You can use the physical pose as a metaphor, asking what each movement means psychologically and spiritually. For example, in [a twist], a balanced foundation is important. Starting from a good base allows the spine to remain aligned and centered, even as you twist. Psychologically you can ask: What

can help me remain straight and centered even in challenging or stressful situations? â?? Swami Lalitananda

JASON CRANDELL ON QUESTIONING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

[Some] teachers are trying to keep their students from turning their pelvis when they rotate their spine. This is the way I taught twists for over 15 years â?? adamantly no lessâ?¦ Iâ??ve changed my tune. I no longer think that the pelvis needs to stay fixed when the spine rotates. In fact, I prefer to allow my pelvis to rotate a little bit in the direction my spine is twistingâ?¦ I want to acknowledge that after years and years and years of teaching postures one way, I changed my mind. All yoga teachers should afford themselves this right so that we continue to question our own assumptions. â?? Jason Crandell

Sample Poses

Twisting Poses

- **Pose Category Visual Views** â?? See here for a pictorial view of twisting poses. The poses are ordered in a generally increasing level of difficulty.
- **Alpha Pose List** â?? See below for an alpha list of twisting poses.

Alpha List

1. Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose)
2. Bharadvajasana I (Sage Twist)
3. Bharadvajasana II
4. Chair Yoga
5. Dwi Pada Koundinyasana (Two Legged Koudinyaâ??s Pose)
6. Eka Pada Koundinyasana I (Pose Dedicated to Sage Koundinya)
7. Eka Pada Koundinyasana II (Flying Splits Pose)
8. Flows / Mini-Vinyasas
9. Jathara Parivartanasana (Revolved Abdomen Pose)
10. Marichyasana III (Twist)
11. Marichyasana III (Twist) Intermediate
12. Paripurna Matsyendrasana (Complete Lord of the Fishes Pose)
13. Parivrtta Ardha Chandrasana (Revolved Half Moon Pose)
14. Parivrtta Hasta Padangusthasana (Revolved Hand to Toe Pose)
15. Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana (Revolved Head to Knee Pose)
16. Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (Revolved Side Angle Pose)
17. Parivrtta Surya Yantrasana
18. Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose)
19. Parivrtta Upavistha Konasana (Side Seated Angle Pose)
20. Parivrtta Utkatasana (Revolved Chair Pose)
21. Parsva Bakasana (Side Crow Pose)
22. Parsva Halasana (Sideways / Twisted Plow Pose)

23. Pasasana (Noose Pose)
24. Reclined Twist
25. Restorative Yoga
26. Seated Twist
27. Stretches: Back & Side-Waist
28. Visvamitrasana (Flying Warrior Pose)
29. Windshield Wipers
30. Yin Yoga

Sequencing & Sample Sequences

A picture containing severalDescription automatically generated

Twists are considered to be neutral poses and can be sequenced between backbends and forward bends. Twists are also excellent poses to take after inverted poses. â?? Rama Jyoti Vernon

Preparation

- Warm up the muscles and connective tissues with standing poses.
- Prepare the deeper layers of spinal muscles with forward bends, backbends and side bends.
- Activate the deeper core (specifically the TA) such as with Toe Taps. (Tiffany Cruikshank)
- â??To prepare for twists, it is always useful to open up the backs of your legs and hips, which create a strong but flexible foundation from which to spiral and turn.â?• (Rodney Yee, p 334)
- Especially for standing twists, warm up the legs and glutes to avoid a tendency to â??lay into the spine and not fully utilize the support of the legs.â?• (Tiffany Cruikshank)
- â??Practicing chest openers, such as Sphinx Pose, before you twist is a nice way to expand the chest â?? a key action while twisting, too.â?• (Ray Long, MD)

WARM UP AND STRETCH HIPS & HAMSTRINGS

Before you attempt any twisting pose, itâ??s essential to warm up properly: Imagine trying to wring out a dry sponge, and youâ??ll understand why. Prepare with some gentle *asanas* that bring blood into the muscles that flex and extend the spine, such as Cat-Cow. Itâ??s also helpful to do some postures that release the hips, such as Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), and stretch the hamstrings, such as Janu Sirsasana (Head to Knee Pose) and Supta Padangusthasana (Reclined Hand to Toe Pose). A few rounds of Sun Salutations, linking movement with the breath, can also help ready body and mind. â?? Carol Krucoff

WARM UP MUSCLES & CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Always warm up first to acclimate the stretch receptors within the muscles and lengthen the myofascial connective tissue. I use five Sun Salutations orâ?¦ several *Adho Mukha Svanasanas* in succession. Then I practice some standing poses that have the pelvis facing forward â?? such as *Trikonasana* and *Virabhadrasana II* â?? followed by an asana that turns the pelvis, such as *Virabhadrasana I.* Warming up in this manner prepares the body for turning poses like *Parvrtta Trikonasana*. Get a feel for rotating

the trunk by bringing the opposite hand to the knee or lower leg in an intermediate variation of the pose. This connects the upper and lower appendicular skeletons. â?? Ray Long MD

Many Potential Roles

- Can be sequenced after backbends to bring body and nervous system back to neutral
- Can be sequenced after forward bends or restoratives to have a stimulating effect
- Can serve as transition poses throughout class as well as ending postures

Counterposes

- If including an intense twist or twisting sequence, following it with a mild backbend such as Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) or Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose) can stabilize sacrum and integrate effect of twists, or, as Rodney Yee describes it, backbending will â??balance the broadening and vulnerability in your back body created by the twists.â?•
- â??Try not to end your practice with a twist due to the asymmetric feel it may leave in your spine. Follow any twisting at the end of your session with at least one symmetric forward bend.â?• (Brad Priddy)

To release any tension created in a twist, I like to follow up with a pose in which the spine is symmetrical. Forward folds â?? such as Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) or Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) â?? are great choices.â?? Ray Long MD

Sequences: Analysis Available

Select the class for an at-a-glance look at the class intention and structure. If it fits your needs, then you can review our deep analysis of the sequence andâ??for most classesâ??download and print a handout with notes.

1. Ashtanga Sequence (Int / Adv 90-min)
2. Ashtanga Short (Int 90-min)
3. Awaken Through Rotation (All 20-min)
4. Core-Strengthening Standing Flow (All â?? Mini)
5. Daily Chakra Balancing (Beg 45-min)
6. Flow: Stoke the Flame (Int / Adv â?? Mini)
7. Twist & Release (All â?? Mini)
8. Hatha Balanced (Int 75-min)
9. Low Back Care: Reclined Hip Stretches (All 10-min)
10. Manipura Flow (Int / Adv 75-min)
11. Muladhara Class (All 60-min)
12. Neck & Shoulder Pain Relief (All 30-min)
13. Neutralizing After Backbends (All â?? Mini)
14. Parsva Bakasana Prep (Int 40-min)
15. Astavakrasana from the Earth (Int â?? Mini)
16. Seated Forward Bending (Int 75-min)
17. Shoulders & Upper Back Focus (Int 40-min)
18. Spring Heat (All 90-min)

19. Strong Standing (Int / Adv 90-min)
20. Transitions Flow (Int / Adv 75-min)
21. Twisting Sequence for Back Pain (All 20-min)
22. Vata-Balancing: Earth Element (Beg 30-min)

The sequences listed above are just a sampling. Please go to the Sequence Finder and filter for â??Category: Twistâ?• to see all possible sequences that meet this focus, choose additional criteria (such as student level) to refine and reduce the results, and enjoy a more visual display of results.

See also specific sequencing considerations for these poses:

- Parivrtta Parsvakonasana
- Parivrtta Trikonasana

More Sequences

Yin Sequence with Hip Stretching, Forward Bending & Twisting link

- **Title** â?? A Yin Yoga Sequence to Lift Your Mood
- **Source** â?? Janice Quirt, Yoga International
- **Focus** â?? Liver meridian (in Traditional Chinese Medicine), hip stretching
- **Format** â?? This sequence includes an introduction on using Yin Yoga with a meridian-based approach and a pose listing with photos and instructions.

Hip, Forward Bend & Twisting Yin Sequence link

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