

## How to Treat the Most Common Type of Yoga Injury By Mark Schillinger, DC

Low back pain is considered the number one symptom in the world. More people miss time off from work due to low back pain than any other condition. Yoga postures can help heal a low back problem or it can make it worse, regardless of the good intention of the yoga instructor!

Many low back symptoms are caused by underlying discs that have been compressed by the vertebra above and below them, often for decades. The disc problems usually began in childhood with injuries related to skiing, sports, dancing, gymnastics, falls off of bicycles and horses, etc. Most of the time the discs were not bulging directly on a nerve or on the spinal cord and therefore caused no symptoms or maybe occasional mild symptoms. Yoga students who engage in backward bending poses often aggravate these asymptomatic disc problems.

It is not uncommon for yoga instructors to encourage their students to continue engaging in backward bending poses as a way to strengthen the deep back muscles (erector spinae and spinalis). Unfortunately this procedure will only inflame the disc more, causing more severe muscular spasm and pain. To determine the exact cause of the symptom, the yoga student should receive an examination by a structural specialist such as a chiropractor, orthopedist or physical therapist familiar with yoga postures and spinal anatomy.

Whether the problem is a soft tissue injury (muscular / tendonous strain or ligamentous sprain) or a disc compression, all backward bending/extension asanas should be eliminated and gentle forward bending asanas should be continued. Applying ice, walking, gentle manipulation, massage therapy and herbal remedies that reduce inflammation should be used in these acute flare-ups of chronic lumbar disc problems.

I recommend my students to slowly move through a series of postures in this order:  
standing – 1) Uttanasana; forward bending from the hips, knees bent, arms relaxed toward the floor 2) Parsvotthanasana (Pyramid Pose); move the right leg two feet forward toward the head, knees bent, arms relaxed toward the floor on either side of the right foot; gently bring the right leg back and move the left leg forward to feet, knees bent, arms relaxed toward the floor on either side of the left foot

floor postures -- 1) Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog); gently get into tabletop position (on your knees and hands), slowly lift knees up without fully straightening them, gently lift buttock higher 2) Balasana (Child's Pose); gently return to tabletop position, slowly lower buttock onto the heels, gently raise both arms over the head, let the head relax naturally

Upon completion of these four postures the student gently returns to a standing position by keeping the torso flexed forward while gently straightening the legs and raising the torso upright. I recommend a minimum of 3 repetitions of this routine. Naturally, the student is encouraged to breathe gently, letting the exhale be slightly longer than the inhale. This routine should be done as often as possible throughout the day.

After the symptoms have completely resolved and the normal range of motion has been completely restored in the lumbar spine, we return to strengthening the lumbar spine musculature. We begin with these simple postures: Salabhasana (Locust), Makrasana (Crocodile) and Matsyasana (Fish Pose - Sitting). Eventually we can add other more strenuous flexion, rotational and extension poses. The backward bending asanas include Setu

Bandhasana (Bridge Pose), Matsyasana (Fish Pose -Supine) and Anjaneyasana (Crescent Moon Pose). If any symptoms arise, we immediately stop the extension asanas.

It may take up to 4 to 6 weeks for soft tissue injuries to resolve and as much as 4 to 6 months for disc injuries to resolve. Regardless how long recovery takes, a yoga student should never rush the healing process. This is the time to embody the principle of "Ahimsa" by being gentle to our healing body and mind. Enjoy other yoga techniques to increase your abilities in other parts of your Sadhana (practice) including meditation, pranayama, chanting and kirtan!