



Hot yoga injuries

Question

Dear Alice,

Hot yoga is becoming more popular every day but there is a lot of conflicting information regarding benefits versus injuries. Most of the information does not quote sources and is therefore difficult to follow up on. It has unquestionably helped me become a more flexible person but there is a lot of information on the net regarding horrific injuries including slipped discs, muscle tears, neck injuries, emotional problems, and even strokes. Is there a research-based, or at least a factual breakdown on the health benefits of stretching at temperatures above body temperature versus the injury risk of exercising at temperatures above body temperature?

Regards, Tentative Yogi

Answer

Dear Tentative Yogi,

Like many forms of yoga, hot yoga has become immensely popular. It can indeed have many benefits. But it may also carry some unique risks, especially when practiced in a western context — one which sometimes (even implicitly) emphasizes competition, calorie burning, and getting a good (read: intense) workout, over mindfulness, inward focus, form, and awareness of the body. In addition, classes are sometimes large and instructors may not always be as attentive to individuals in the class as would be ideal. There are a few other concerns to keep in mind when practicing hot yoga; however, if you stay mindful of these, the benefits will generally outweigh the risks.

The heat that is a part of Bikram and other forms of hot yoga, does serve to increase blood flow to the muscles and to increase collagen elasticity. Studies have shown that heat in combination with stretching can increase flexibility and range-of-motion (interestingly, studies also demonstrate that cold can increase flexibility because it decreases muscle spasms, pain reception, and sometimes dilating blood vessels). The increased heat can also decrease a person's pain perception. This, combined with the increased flexibility that comes with stretching in the heat, can cause some people to push their body farther than it's ready to go. If you're doing poses that stretch beyond your limits, or muscling through poses, you're likely making yourself more susceptible to injury. Staying mindful of your body and your limits, as well as practicing with a trained instructor can help to decrease the chances of injury.

Another note of caution: The humid heat in hot yoga increases sweating, which can increase the chances for dehydration, also making one more susceptible to injury. Please, please stay hydrated! Be cautious of overheating. Your body naturally cools itself down using mechanisms such as sweating; however, crowded, hot yoga rooms can make this challenging. Read *Does sweating release toxins?* from the *Go Ask Alice!* archives for more information.

Supplementing your yoga with weight or resistance training will help decrease susceptibility to injury. Strength (not just flexibility) helps guard against pulls and strains. In fact, some research shows that weak, flexible muscles are more prone to injury than are strong, stiff muscles.

If you maintain an awareness of your limits and “listen” to your body, the “hotness” of hot yoga does not necessarily present a danger. Either way, kudos to you for finding a form of physical activity that you enjoy!

Take care,

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