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THE GENTLE APPROACH TO A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

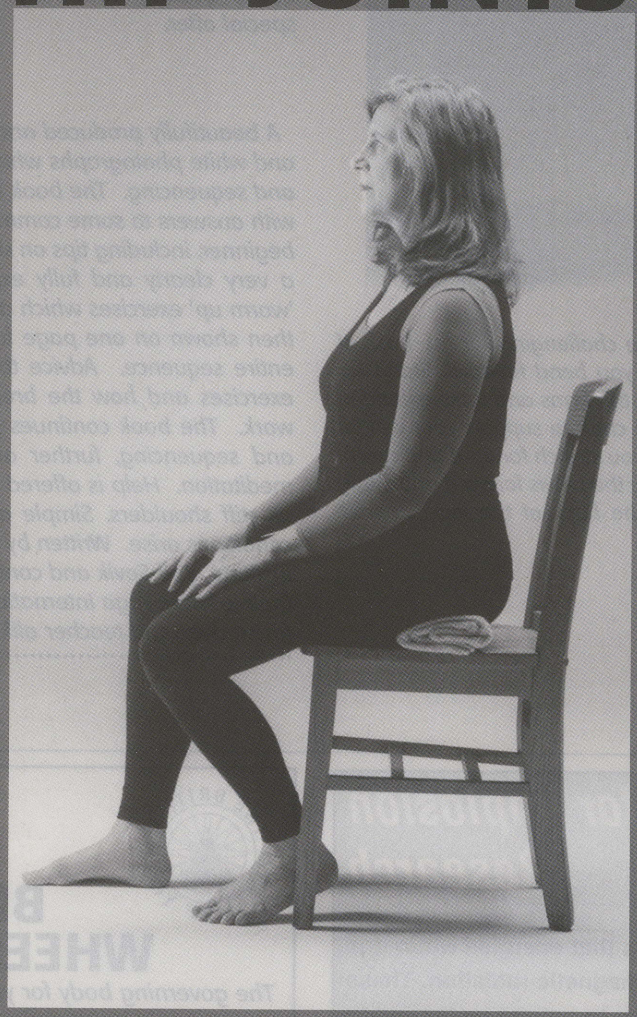
GAINING FLEXIBLE HIP JOINTS

By Liz Koch

A chiropractor once told me that 65% of older adults end up having hip socket replacement. The day my mother had her hip socket surgery the doctor had already operated on eight other hips. Knee and lower back injuries are one of the first signs that the hip sockets are becoming "locked".

A locked hip socket refers to a condition where the pelvis and leg move as a unit rather than separately. When movement is limited within the ball and socket joint, a person ends up using their knees or lumbar/pelvic junction (L5) for rotating. Shoes, baby apparatuses, a lack of crawling, emotional fear and pelvic injuries are just some of the reasons why hip sockets become locked. No matter what the reason or your age, a lack of mobility in the hip joints eventually causes muscular tension, nerve pain, poor circulation and limited range of motion. So what can you do to activate your hip sockets and prevent them from deteriorating later in life?

Simply put, engaging your hip sockets is your best means of keeping them flexible. It is the lack of stimulation and misuse that encourages the brittle wear and tear that leads to surgery. Yoga provides an opportunity for regaining flexible hip sockets.



Sitting in front of tuberosities, with hip sockets slightly higher than knees. Keeps hip socket open for good circulation.

The old adage 'use them or lose them' applies well. Engaging your hip sockets is vital to their health. Learning to use your hip sockets properly involves letting go of the muscular tension that prevents the head of the femur from rolling in the pelvic socket. It then requires developing enough somatic awareness to execute all rotational movements within the ball and socket joint. The following ideas when integrated into your Yoga practice can help to prevent hip socket problems in the future while improving your flexibility and range of motion right now.

Balance your pelvis

The pelvis forms the foundation of your structural core. A balanced pelvis creates a base for the spinal vertebrae, rib cage, shoulder girdle and head and transfers weight from the spine into the legs, knees, ankles and feet. The feet receive weight evenly only when the pelvic girdle is centred and gravitationally aligned. Problems with knees, ankles and feet can often be traced to instability, torsion or flexion within the pelvic girdle. Pelvic tilts, twists, dip or torques are all signs of pelvic instability. Off-centre, the pelvis reveals its instability in symptoms that include hip socket tension, knee and ankle problems, the inability to stand on both feet, and difficulty in walking.

Whether sitting, standing or stretching, it is the pelvis that defines good skeletal positioning. With each asana, position your pelvis first. Be sure your pelvis is stable, centred and aligned. Eliminate any torsion, twists or dips in the pelvis by modifying or, if necessary, selecting a different position. Remember, it can take years to open fully to a pose. Go slowly, entering each pose with awareness.

In sitting asanas, place your weight in front of your tuberosities (sitting bones). Sit on a firm bolster to keep the hips parallel with the floor and the knees lower than your hip sockets. Doing so expands the hip socket and increases blood circulation.

Stay within your range of motion. Do not stress the hip joints by over-extending or over-stretching. Your knees should not be suspended or your pelvis sagging for lack of support. Instead, provide each joint the support it needs by using a prop (a folded blanket or a rolled towel). Muscles surrounding a potentially vulnerable joint tense in an attempt to provide support. By using props or modifying the pose you free the muscles that surround the joint to stretch.

Think of your pelvis as part of your torso. The leg begins at the hip socket not the waist. When stable , the pelvis maintains the integrity of the trunk while freeing the core muscle, the ilio-*psoas*, to move as a muscular pendulum through the abdominal core. Walking becomes energising; the leg moving at the ball and socket joint swings freely from the centered pelvis.

Release your ilio-*psoas* muscle

The ilio-psoas (*psoas* and *iliacus* muscle) plays a major role in freeing the ball and socket joint. Depending upon its length and suppleness, your ilio-*psoas* will free or limit your range of motion. Passing right over the ball and socket joint on its way to the femur, the ilio-*psoas* for better or worse, influences all-rotating hip and leg movement.

When the ilio-psoas is tight and constricted, the femur ball cannot roll. Movement stops right where the head of the femur (the ball) rotates in the pelvic joint (socket). If short, the *iliacus* (a fan shaped muscle that lines the inside of the pelvic bowl) pulls and narrows the pelvic bowl compressing the hip socket. The

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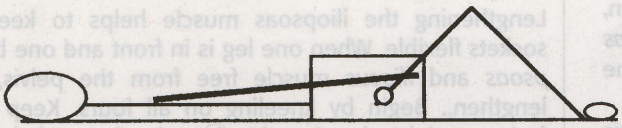
Preparation for Yoga Stretches

Releasing the iliopsoas muscle unlocks the hip sockets. Warm-up before stretching.

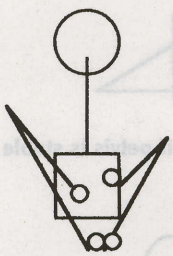


Constructive rest position

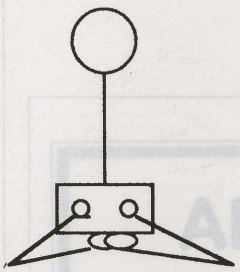
Rest on your back. The trunk and head should be parallel with the floor. DO NOT force the spine along the floor. Knees are bent and the feet are placed parallel to each other, in front of your hip sockets. The heels will be approximately12-16 inches away from your buttocks. Rest your hands on your hip sockets, located in the hollow area on either side of your pubis bone. Gentle massage while focusing your awareness on releasing the iliopsoas as it passes over the hip socket.

Sitting Poses

Sit in front of the tuberosities (sitting bones). To find them, touch the bones under your buttocks. They are round and work like a fulcrum. Lift your pelvis, pull back each glut muscle and sit down again. To sit without compression or tension in the hip sockets, you may need to modify your position. Placing the pelvis higher than the knee frees the ball and socket joint and prevents compression in the hip socket. Modify your position by raising the pelvis with a folded mat, bolster or sitting cushion. How high you lift your pelvis depends upon the resting length of your psoas and leg muscles.



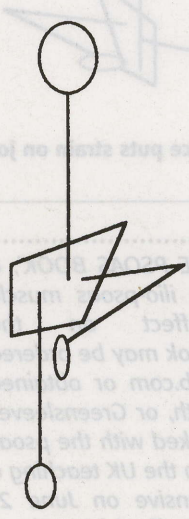
tight hip sockets



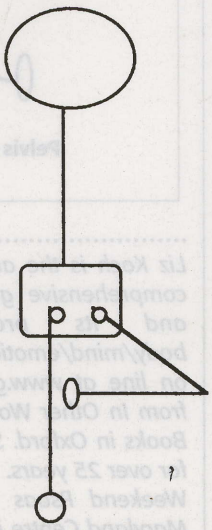
stable pelvis helps open hips sockets

Standing Poses

Standing on one leg can strain the hip joint ligaments. Keep the pelvis stable and weight bearing.



Unstable pelvis puts strain on hip socket ligaments



Stable pelvis effects hip socket mobility

psoas (the only muscle to attach the lumbar spine to the leg) begins at the *solar plexus* (12th thoracic vertebrae) and attaches to each of the 5 lumbar vertebrae. It moves through the pelvis and over the hip socket attaching to the inner thigh. When tense or short, the *psoas* muscle flexes the pelvis forward and down, limiting space within the hip joint. Together, the *iliacus* and *psoas* join at the hip socket in a common tendon that inserts into the lesser trocanter of the femur.

Keeping the ilio-psoas supple involves attention to pelvic positioning. If your skeletal positioning is not aligned, the ilio-psoas muscle takes over to support weight. Muscular tension around the hip socket results in locking the pelvis and leg together. Developing your awareness of the ilio-psoas softens the muscular tension around the hip socket.

Articulate the leg from the pelvis

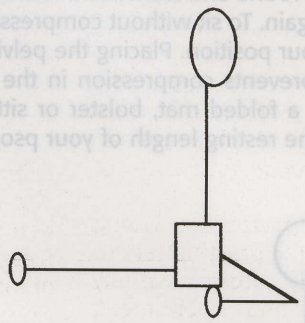
All leg movements begin within the pelvic core. To prevent hip socket compression, tension and torsion, when moving the leg, all rotational movement must be initiated within the ball and socket joints. Sensory awareness exercises help to articulate the joint and differentiate the sensation of rotation in the socket from that of twisting the knee or thrusting the lumbar spine.

The hip socket joints have sensory receptors that, if stimulated, align and balance the body. Crawling is one of the best sensory exercises for waking up the hip sockets. It is the synchronised action of muscles moving the skeletally aligned bones through their full range of motion that stimulates true hip socket flexibility. Awareness is your most powerful key for unlocking the hip sockets and gaining flexibility.

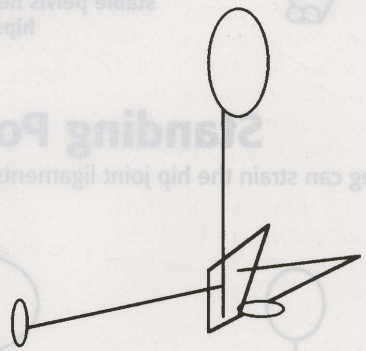
Lengthening the Iliopsoas Muscle

Lengthening the iliopsoas muscle helps to keep the hip sockets flexible. When one leg is in front and one behind, the *psoas* and *iliacus* muscle free from the pelvis, begin to lengthen,. Begin by kneeling on all fours. Keep the pelvis facing straight ahead and soften the front of the right hip socket and slide the bent front leg forward. Softening the left hip socket, extend the left leg behind your pelvis. DO NOT let the pelvis torque or move as you extend the left leg back. If the right buttock does not sit on the floor, use a prop to keep the pelvis level and supported.

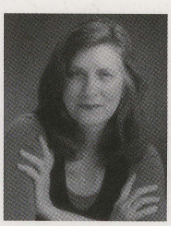
The extended left leg contains the ilio*psoas* you are lengthening. The *psoas* and *iliacus* stretch only if the pelvis is stable and facing forwards. If the pelvis torques, the ilio*psoas* does not stretch. **Releasing and stretching begins in the front of the hip socket**, where the *psoas* crosses the ball and socket joint and radiates up through the torso. Switch sides.



Ilio*psoas* stretches only if pelvis is stable



Pelvis out of balance puts strain on joints.



Liz Koch is the author of 'THE PSOAS BOOK', a comprehensive guide to the ilio-psoas muscle and its profound effect on the body/mind/emotions. Her book may be ordered on line at www.guineapigpub.com or obtained from In Other Words, Plymouth, or Greensleeves Books in Oxford. She has worked with the psoas for over 25 years. Liz will be in the UK teaching a Weekend Psoas Muscle Intensive on June 29- July 1 at the Maryland Centre in Woburn, Bedfordshire. She may be reached at liz@coreawarness.com or call UK contact Nina Pearson 020-8643-1609 for registration information.