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Illuminating the Iliacus

By Liz Koch

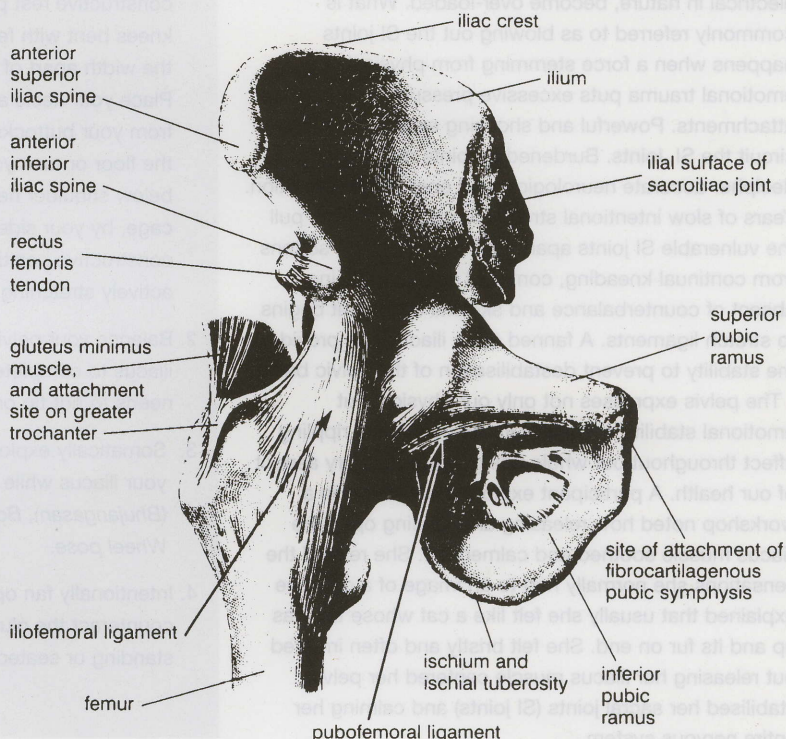
Some muscles just seem to grab our attention and dominate our awareness while stretching: quads, hamstrings and abdominals are all too familiar. But ask anyone where their *iliacus* muscle is and the response most often will be one of uncertainty. And yet the iliacus directly influences range of motion within the hip sockets and maintains pelvic integrity so essential to flexibility and strength.

Lining the internal pelvic girdle the iliacus opens like a fan, creating a healthy bowl-like structure for all abdominal organs and viscera. It is the well-functioning iliacus that maintains full-centered sockets for the femur ball and helps stabilise the sacral iliac joints by counterbalancing the large and powerful gluteus maximus muscles (buttock muscles).

The Iliacus is a posterior abdominal wall muscle originating from the superior part of the iliac fossa (the inside of your hip). It is innervated by the femoral nerve in the abdomen (at lumbar 2 and 3) and its' fibres pass inferiorly and medially beneath the inguinal ligament. Sharing a tendon at the lesser trochanter of the femur (i.e. the inner leg), with the psoas muscle, the iliacus is part of the core ilio-psoas muscle group.

Together the psoas and iliacus form a full stable pelvic bowl and centered hip joints for maximum rotation and freedom of leg movement. Health or disease in one will be reflected in the other. If for example the psoas muscle shortens, tipping the pelvic bowl forward (i.e. flexing the pelvis), the internal abdominal space will narrow restricting the function of the iliacus muscle to fan laterally open. A constrained iliacus muscle pulls the pelvic crests together, narrowing the width of the pelvic basin and compressing the hip sockets. Limiting the psoas muscle as it passes over the hip socket the restricted iliacus effects range of motion in the leg and can compromise the *sacral iliac* (SI) joints.

Shallow, the pelvic bowl no longer provides a structural container for the organs and viscera. Without pelvic support the organs fall forward and the abdominal muscles lose tone. The congestion translates into abdominal problems such as poor absorption and difficult elimination. Reproductive dysfunctions such as whether or not a woman has menstrual cramps, and the vitality and success of pregnancy, how she carries her baby to term and even the success of vaginal birth is in part dependent upon the iliacus.



Recently two women who attended an Ilio-psoas retreat returned home and immediately conceived. Both women did not believe they would ever be able to become impregnated or hold a pregnancy. In fact they were not even relating their ilio-psoas explorations to their infertility. It was an assumed condition. But there is a connection. When the pelvis tips forward narrowed by the iliacus muscle, the uterus also tips forward. A forward tipped uterus is often synonymous with miscarriage. It's impossible to tell all that goes into creating the right conditions for a successful pregnancy, but deep relaxation is associated with ilio-psoas release and the freedom of pelvic function may have contributed to their surprising success.

A narrow pelvic basin also affects the low back, neck and shoulder girdle. Compensating for the tipped pelvis the upper structural integrity becomes compromised and alters in an attempt to re-establish balance. The iliacus fans the pelvic lower body open and the shoulder girdle matches the width of the upper body. The suspensularis muscles lining the inside of the scapula, mirrors the breath and width of the iliacus muscle.

Illustrations courtesy of the excellent, ANATOMY OF HATHA YOGA by David Coulter, published by Body & Breath Inc, US, www.bodyandbreath.com and distributed in the UK by the Himalayan Institute, Tel: 020 8991 8090.

Most importantly a fanned iliocostalis matches the power and strength of the gluteus maximus (gluts) muscles. In a forward bend the gluts, especially when over developed, can pull on the deep ligaments of the pelvic basin and over time cause pelvic instability and sacral iliac (SI joint) pain.

The SI joints are a web of ligaments, weaving the three pelvic bones together. SI joints give the sacrum its suppleness but they are also vulnerable to slow or fast powerful stretching. Within the SI ligaments the proprioceptive neuro-receptors register both physical and emotional stress. Imbedded within the ligaments, these major receptors co-ordinate alignment and balance.

When under stress the receptors, structural and electrical in nature, become over-loaded. What is commonly referred to as blowing out the SI joints happens when a force stemming from physical or emotional trauma puts excessive pressure on the pelvic attachments. Powerful and shocking experiences short-circuit the SI Joints. Burdened SI joints no longer decipher accurate neurological and energetic information. Years of slow intentional stretching can also slowly pull the vulnerable SI joints apart. Like Turkish toffee softens from continual kneading, continual static stretching absent of counterbalance and skeletal alignment begins to stretch ligaments. A fanned open iliocostalis can provide the stability to prevent destabilisation of the pelvic basin.

The pelvis expresses not only our physical but emotional stability. Instability in the core has a rippling affect throughout our whole being affecting every aspect of our health. A participant exploring her iliocostalis in a workshop noted how releasing and fanning open the iliocostalis muscle soothed and calmed her. She related the sensations she normally had to an image of a cat. She explained that usually she felt like a cat whose tail was up and its fur on end. She felt bristly and often irritated but releasing her iliocostalis muscle centered her pelvis, stabilised her sacral joints (SI joints) and calming her entire nervous system.

To be physically and emotionally stable involves the pelvis to be in a right relationship to every other bone and in harmony with the earth. Balancing the pelvis by fanning open the iliocostalis provides an important step towards maintaining and/or re-creating core integrity.

Here are 4 ways to illuminate your iliocostalis

Activate your Iliocostalis muscle by:

1. Focusing on fanning open the muscle while in the constructive rest position. Rest on your back, knees bent with feet placed parallel to each other, the width apart of the front of your hip sockets. Place your heels approximately 16 inches away from your buttocks. Do not push your low back to the floor or tuck your pelvis. Keep your arms below shoulder height, resting them over your ribcage, by your sides or on your pelvis. Rest in constructive position for 10 -20 minutes before actively stretching.
2. Balance your pelvis before stretching. For the iliocostalis to completely fan open the pelvic basin needs to not tip or torque.
3. Somatically explore releasing and fanning open your iliocostalis while in Kneeling (Vajrasana), Cobra (Bhujangasana), Bow (Dhanurasana) and modified Wheel pose.
4. Intentionally fan open the iliocostalis muscle, to counteract the gluts when flexing forward in standing or seated bends.

Liz Koch is an internationally known teacher with 27 years experience and is the author of 'The Psoas Book' a comprehensive guide to the Iliopsoas Muscle and its profound affect on the body/mind/emotions, 'Unraveling Scoliosis CD' which offers a new paradigm for skeletal alignment & a new book 'Core Awareness: Enhancing Yoga, Pilates, Exercise & Dance'. Liz will be teaching three Core Awareness workshops in England and Ireland in June/July 04. To find out more about workshops and the psoas muscle you may visit www.coreawareness.com

