

When Yoga Hurts

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Amy Toosley was standing in a split pose when her yoga instructor gave her leg a little prod. "I heard the loudest pop I've ever heard, and the instructor said, 'Ooh! Good release, huh?'" Toosley recalls. "Not really--I could hardly walk." With her hamstring muscle snapped, Toosley, 32, avoided yoga for the next three months, and almost a year later, she is still in pain.

Bad-mouthing yoga seems like begging for a hit of unfavorable karma. But with more than 14 million people practicing yoga or tai chi nationwide, up 136% since 2000, orthopedic surgeons, physical therapists and chiropractors across the country are dealing with the increasing fallout from yoga gone awry. Over the past three years, 13,000 Americans were treated in an emergency room or a doctor's

office for yoga-related injuries, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Often people get hurt because they assume that yoga is simple and that anybody can pretzel himself or herself on demand. Edward Toriello, an orthopedic surgeon and spokesman for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, says most of the injuries he sees are sustained by "weekend warrior" baby boomers who begin yoga without realizing that their bodies are no longer what they used to be. "They think that yoga is an easy way to start exercising, so they go to class once a week, not stretched out at all, and they get hurt."

At the same time, others see yoga--a practice originally conceived to help people achieve inner peace and tranquillity--as a way to get a vigorous workout. More than five times as many people take yoga classes at health clubs today as did a decade ago, and enthusiasts have devised all kinds of variations appalling to purists: hip-hop yoga, disco yoga, power yoga, not to mention controversial hot yoga, or Bikram, which incites people to push themselves to their limit in sweltering rooms in which temperatures are set at 105°F (41°C). The truth is, yoga, regardless of the form, doesn't offer a comprehensive way to get fit. According to a study by the American Council on Exercise, a national nonprofit organization that certifies fitness instructors and promotes physical fitness, dedicated yoga practitioners show no improvement in cardiovascular health. It's not the best way to lose weight either. A typical 50-min. class of hatha yoga, one of the most popular styles of yoga in the U.S., burns off

fewer calories than are in three Oreos--about the same as a slow, 50-min. walk. Even power yoga burns fewer calories than a comparable session of calisthenics. And while yoga has been shown to alleviate stress and osteoarthritis, it doesn't develop the muscle-bearing strength needed to help with osteoporosis.

Part of the problem is that increasingly, the people teaching yoga don't know enough about it. Yoga was traditionally taught one-on-one by a yogi over a period of years, but today instructors can lead a class after just a weekend course. Though the Yoga Alliance, formed in 1999 and now based in Clinton, Md., has set a minimum standard of 200 hours of training for certification, only 16,168 of the estimated 70,000 instructors in the U.S. have been certified. "Yoga means bringing together mind, body and spirit, but in Western yoga, we've distilled it down to body," says Shana Meyerson, an instructor in Los Angeles. "That's not even yoga anymore. If the goal is to look like Madonna, you're better off running or spinning." Namaste to that.