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TAYLOR™

# Ask a Yoga Therapist

## Yoga Therapy for Neck Pain and Headaches

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The "Ask a Yoga Therapist" series is for general information purposes and does not constitute as medical advice or prescription. Readers should seek local, qualified consultation and direction from their healthcare professional prior to acting on portion of these columns. Individual consultation is available with Dr. Taylor at [www.drmatthewtaylor.com](http://www.drmatthewtaylor.com) .

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## Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of an ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to [askatherapist@yogatherapy.com](mailto:askatherapist@yogatherapy.com) Back issues available at [www.askayogatherapist.com](http://www.askayogatherapist.com).

**Q:** Despite extensive medical testing and treatment I still have headaches and neck pain almost every day. Is there anything Yoga therapy can offer that I might not have tried yet?

**A:** There is quite a bit that Yoga therapy has to offer once you have been cleared medically to participate in Yoga. We'll look at not only some postures and breathing that might help, but also touch on some less physical aspects of Yoga that often hold keys for relieving the suffering associated with head and neck pain.

### Viewing the Whole of You

I like to tell people who have been through standard treatment without success that sometimes looking "south" holds a key for resolving the problem. By south I mean lower in the body and in fact all the way to the toes.

You see between your head and your toes lay three diaphragms of muscular and dynamic control. Think of them as a musical trio and for you to enjoy their music, the three must be in harmony. In medicine we call these the thoracic outlet (shoulders/neck/upper chest), the respiratory diaphragm (covers the entire bottom of the rib cage), and the pelvic floor (the part of your body that rests on the saddle of a horse). In Yoga these areas have been described for centuries as important places of balance and awareness, known as the bandhas.

An imbalance or tightness in anyone of these areas throws the other two off and can generate discomfort and pain in any one or more of the others as well. A good yoga therapist will help you discover which if any may be affected and prescribe techniques to resolve the imbalance. The causes can be from:

- Poor postural support and ergonomics
- Bad sleeping habits
- Repetitive oral habits (clenching, chewing, etc.)
- Diet and use of stimulants
- Faulty breathing patterns
- Physical inactivity (couch potato-it is)

But be prepared, as often more subtle aspects of our human experience are the cause, such emotional distress, fear, spiritual isolation or anger fuel the imbalance. Failure to explore and address these states will keep you on the merry-go-around of pain. A missing ingredient in many students prescription for

relief is often that there is no joy in their life. I ask, “What do you do for fun?” and there’s a long awkward silence, often followed by an admission they don’t have much fun and certainly not every day. If that includes you the reader, then start scheduling some at least once a day...and triple your out loud laughter while you are at it. It’s free and non-allergenic, though it can be infectious!

### **Postures and Breathing**

Now on to what you thought you were going to read about, Yoga postures and breathing. These postures, or asana, and breathing (pranayama) will be prescribed based on the evaluation by the Yoga therapist. Typically they include grounding the feet and toes as the foundation, then opening both the hips and chest. By performing these in conjunction with your awareness around the above mentioned subtle issues, you increase your sensitivity and consciousness in that moment and later moments to moments in your daily life. We call those moments “Off the Mat” Yoga because what you discover in the formal practice should transform what you do away from the mat. As you explore relationships between how you hold yourself during life and your response to life, you can return to work together with the Yoga therapist to address those intertwined relationships that may have gone unnoticed or weren’t addressed in your earlier treatment attempts. Be assured, you will be invited to change, but then stimulating change is a primary function of pain anyway.

### **Surrender and Action**

As you continue to learn and change, hopefully you will experience the “art” of Yoga in your life. It is a beautiful dance of action and surrender. Accepting what is and acting to change what will be. When we lose our balance and become stuck, often the head throbs, the neck stiffens and the heart collapses in despair. Restoring that dance we become light and free in our actions, vanishing pain and suffering, and becoming an inspiration to others to wake up and engage the moment with sweetness and calm.

### **Extended Resources**

Here a couple of wonderful resources to deepen your exploration into relieving neck and head pain. I was privileged to be the expert content matter reviewer for my colleague [Carol Krucoff's](#) excellent guide book “[Healing Yoga for Neck and Shoulder Pain: Easy, Effective Practices for Relieving Tension and Pain.](#)” Her writing style is clear and simple, providing sound insight and guidance for readers. The other resource is [Kelly McGonigal's](#) “[Yoga for Pain Relief: Simple Practices to Calm Your Mind & Heal Your Chronic Pain.](#)” Kelly is the editor for the PubMed accepted Journal of Yoga Therapy and offers additional practices and techniques.

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