



The Psoas Muscle

What if I told you that this muscle you've probably never heard of could be the key to releasing your knee pain, your ankle pain, your shoulder pain and your neck pain? It may be hard to believe, but by the end of this article you will understand why releasing this muscle can relieve pain and tightness from our feet to our heads. Releasing the psoas can be the key to opening up the body and allowing it to expand and relax.

You have two psoas muscles, one on each side. The psoas is your hip flexor. It is attached to every vertebrae of your lumbar (low) spine. It descends into the pelvis and joins with the iliacus muscle in your hip socket and then dives down to attach to your femur in the back, near your sits-bone. It is the muscle that lifts your leg when you walk, run, and bike. It also does a little bit of rotation of the leg and can bring the low back closer to the pelvis and legs. If tight it will pull the legs up and into the hip sockets at a slight rotation. It will also pull the back down and forward, compressing the joints and tilting the pelvis. This pull can cause repercussions in the knees, feet, shoulders and neck. If I compared your body to a bicycle wheel, the psoas would be the center, and if the center gets warped the outside will get warped too.



When the psoas is tight it will rotate the femur. Of course we walk with our feet straight which puts a twist where? That's right...the joint that really doesn't like to twist. The knee. It has been my experience that knee problems that aren't caused by blunt force (i.e. a ski accident), are often a result of a chronically tight psoas muscle. And even when there is a traumatic reason for a knee injury, releasing the psoas can ease extra strain on the knee and result in faster healing and decreased pain. I have a regular massage client who is in his 50's, in good shape, plays basketball and golf, but was plagued by pain in his left knee. He even thought about quitting basketball, but after releasing his psoas and maintaining that release, (I see him every six weeks or so), he really has no knee pain and has been able to continue and even increase his exercise regime.

The psoas can also pull the whole upper body down toward the center. Our body is all interconnected. One thing pulls another thing, which pulls another thing. A tight psoas can pull the shoulders down and in, which can cause everything from sore upper back muscles, to arthritis, bursitis, bone spurs, and torn rotator cuff muscles. This shoulder pull will also affect the neck, pulling it down and forward.

The psoas muscle is the muscle that pulls us into a fetal position. We tend to hold a lot of trauma there, and in our bellies in general. This is one reason we often have trouble with this muscle. Of course sitting all the time doesn't help either. We spend much more time in flexion, (at our computers, in our cars) than we do in extension. When our psoas gets stuck in flexion it will tilt our whole pelvis and puts extra stress on our spine which we tend to feel in our neck and low back. This chronic pelvis tilt can also cause tight hamstrings, which you can never seem to stretch. You can't stretch them because they're already stretched do to the pelvic tilt.

There is hope! There are many wonderful ways to release your psoas muscle. You could see a massage therapist that is comfortable working on the psoas (just ask them before you make the appointment). There are great stretches to be done and something called creative rest where you lie on your back with your feet up on a chair and allow your low back to fall on the floor and your hip sockets to release. Yoga and Pilates can be effective ways to work on the psoas.

Being successful in decreasing our pain and stiffness lies in treating the cause, not just the symptoms. Once you release the pull (which is often the psoas) everything else can release. Now that you know what the problem might be you will be much more successful at finding solutions.

Beth Sabo Novik is a massage therapist and personal trainer in Saratoga Springs, NY. She specializes in working with people in pain. You can reach her at 518-583-8831 or check out her website, www.bsnbodywork.com.