

Learn How to Protect Your Wrists in Your Practice

BY RAY LONG, MD

By nature, our wrists are particularly prone to injury. Learn how you can protect them in your yoga practice.

If your yoga practice involves moving into and out of Downward-Facing Dog Pose and Chaturanga Dandasana, wrist pain may be a current or looming problem.

I teach workshops internationally to teachers and students who are serious about improving their practices, and about 25 percent of my students admit to wrist pain during vinyasa. And when you explore the anatomy of the wrists, it's easy to see how these vulnerable structures might easily suffer from improper weight transfer and repetitive movement.

Wrist Anatomy

Your wrists have a lot of moving parts. They start where your two forearm bones, the radius and ulna, meet with three of the eight carpal bones on each hand. The rest of the carpal bones connect with each other and the fingers. An array of ligaments connects the many bones to each other, and muscles and tendons lie above and below the bones to move the wrist and fingers.

Common Wrist Injuries

With all this complexity, misalignments in bones, ligaments, and muscles during weight-bearing poses are bound to happen, which can trigger wrist pain and two common conditions in particular. The first, called ulno-carpal abutment syndrome, indicates pressure where the ulna meets the carpal bones on the little-finger side of the wrist. This may occur if the ulna bone has an unusual shape—something just a small percentage of us are born with—or if the wrist is repeatedly turned out toward the little finger in weight-bearing poses like Downward-Facing Dog.

The second syndrome, tendonitis, is characterized by tendon inflammation, often due to misalignment and weight transfer in poses such as Chaturanga Dandasana, where the wrist joint is in full extension. Chronic wrist injury is also common in yogis with relaxed or hyper-mobile ligaments, which can cause inflammation, pain, and ultimately arthritis.

The Surprising Secret to Protecting Your Wrists

The key to protecting your wrists is—surprise!—a strong core. Evidence-based medicine demonstrates that a strong core can increase the efficiency of the rotator cuff muscles. These muscles stabilize the shoulders and can thus decrease the load that is transferred to your wrists. On the flip side, low core strength or failure to engage the core in poses like Chaturanga Dandasana can lead to decreased trunk

and shoulder stability. If the core is weak, strong shear forces transfer across the wrist, especially during transitions between poses. So picture the ubiquitous Down Dog-Chaturanga-Up Dog-Down Dog sequence. Each time you repeat it, your wrists bear weight throughout. Over time and without proper support, this can lead to the injuries described above. But when effort is well dispersed throughout the core and shoulders in a vinyasa-based practice, that force in the wrists is minimized.