

Can't seem to sit on the floor any more - Hip Stiffness/Pain

by James Bone
www.yogaplustherapies.com

“Too much Sitting, too little Stretching”

Freedom to Move

Healthy Hip movement is essential to our daily lives – being able to walk freely, get in and out of cars or chairs, and putting on our shoes. Having free hips allows us to feel younger, be more active, and reduce our risk of strain and pain to other areas of our bodies, such as back pain, knee pain and foot pain. It may also help reduce your risk of hip arthritis and pain later in life.

Some Technical Info

The hip joint lies deep within our groin area, hidden behind many muscles, so it cannot be felt from the outside. It is not the big bony point on the side of our upper thighs, which we often mistake as our hips. It is called a ball and socket joint, as it is characterised by a large bony head, which angles upward and inward from the thigh bone (femur), which fits into the socket of the pelvis. This gives the hip the ability to move in 3 directions. It is supported by 3 very strong ligaments which tighten as the hip joint extends ie tightens in standing. It is also surrounded by strong powerful muscles, which are able to provide movement.

Stability and Ease

Deep and close to the bones are the smaller postural muscles, which provide stability to the hip joint.

Balance

Hip flexibility must always be balanced with hip stability for healthy joints. This is similar to the yoga concept of good posture (asana) practice of “sthira suhka” meaning posture should display components of both stability (strength) and ease (flexibility).

Why are my hips stiff?

The recent North West Adelaide Study found that approximately 9% of people identified having problems with stiff or painful hips. They found that it was more common in women, people over the age of 50, people over weight or with overly large waist measure, and who were inactive. (A study by Tuschen in Scandinavia found that the squatting work position helped reduce hip pain risk.)

Some of us are born with a tendency towards more hip stiffness. Our connective tissue may be tighter, or the bony structure of the hip joint may not allow as much movement.

The commonest cause of hip pain or stiffness is probably osteo-arthritis. There are many other medical causes that are beyond the scope of this article.

Observationally I have found that we can also hold a lot of tension and 'emotions' around our hips, which can lead to hip stiffness or pain.

Posture – the way we hold ourselves in daily lives, and habits – the way we use our bodies in daily life, can also influence our stiffness.

The yogis say that the foods we eat can also influence our flexibility. Though there is no specific research about this, you can test this for yourself (see simple flexibility test below.)

One factor I also feel may influence our hips is the fact that in our society we sit in chairs too much, causing tightening of our hip muscles.

Test your flexibility

Try this test: Sitting on the floor, with your legs out straight with the toes facing straight up – bend forward and see where you can reach – measure how many centimetres above or below your foot you can reach. Do this at the same time every day you do your test. Test yourself regularly and see what affects your flexibility – inactivity, over doing exercise, foods you eat, emotions you hold, stress levels....

So what happens if you have stiff or painful hip/s?

Firstly it can alter the way you walk – this is common in older adults with stiff hips. They begin to take shorter steps, avoiding extending the hip backward, slowing down their walking speed. If it is on one side only it can lead to a limping gait.

If the hip is stiff, it can also put stress on other parts of the body and also affect posture:

- If the hip is stiff, to extend backwards – it may cause the spine to over extend, leading to back pain.
- If the hip is stiff in rotation – it may lead to increased pressure on the foot, causing pronated (or flat) arches, and foot pain.
- A stiff hip – may also lead to increased pressure to the knee joint, leading to injury or pain.

If you are physical, play sport, run, dance, do martial arts etc, then having stiff hips may also affect your performance of those activities.

Some of you who practise Yoga may also find that hip stiffness can prevent doing some of the yoga postures comfortably, or not be able to do them at all. For example, simply sitting on the floor with crossed legs, takes quite a lot of hip mobility.

TIPS to have more freedom and less pain with your hips

If you have hip pain, a medical problem, or are uncertain about how to do the practices, then you should seek professional/medical advice or assistance before proceeding with the following practices.

- Develop the attitude of SPACIOUSNESS with your hips – not tension, contraction or compression.
- Check if stress, worry, held emotions or tension is affecting your hips or the muscles around your hips – acknowledge the issues and let them go – seek counselling if needed.
- Develop the capacity to move your hips in all directions using your muscles, not trying to force the action with your arms or body weight.
- Be nurturing to yourself – take time to open up your restrictions without pain or strain. Sometimes if you try too hard, you go backwards.
- Protect your knees – cause no strain to your knees when stretching – use the knee lock by contracting thigh and hamstring muscles gently to protect your knees.
- Return yourself to natural posture – standing upright with natural spinal curves and pelvis balanced over your feet, imagine lifting your pelvis upward from your hips.
LIFT TALL – To help activate your postural muscles start with your feet. Keep your toes long, heels and balls of feet flat and lightly press the toe tips to the floor. Feel the arches lift slightly and begin to feel the postural muscles activate through your body, lifting upward all the way to the crown of your head.
- Move naturally and gracefully – when walking, emphasise showing your soles behind. When running, lead with your knees powering forward.
- Move more – don't stay in the same position all the time (get out of that chair!)
- If you can, sit on the floor more, instead of just in chairs.
- Don't forget to strengthen your muscles properly – look at this in future articles.
- Reduce your weight if overweight.
- Include some REGULAR YOGA STRETCHES to open your hips – see your yoga teacher for advice.
- If you have a hip problem see your physiotherapist or health practitioner

References:

www.health.sa.gov.au/pros/portals/0/13%20Hip%20pain%20final.pdf

Tuchsen et al "Risk factors predicting hip pain in a 5 year-year prospective cohort study" Scan ? Work Environ Health 200329(1):35-39