

## When Dogs become a Pain – Wrist Pain with Yoga arm weight bearing Postures

by James Bone, Physiotherapist and Yoga teacher  
Yoga plus Therapies

Have you ever experienced pain in your wrists when doing yoga postures, such as Downward or Upward Facing Dog?

In Yoga postures where you take your body weight (weight bearing) through your arms can be great practices to help increase shoulder, arm and bone strength, aid focus, and increase versatility to your practice.

However, they can cause problems to your shoulders, arms and especially your wrists and hands

- if they are performed incorrectly
- if you try to progress through them too quickly without first consolidating your strength
- if you do them when you already have wrist or upper limb problems
- if you over do it and don't stop when you have become fatigued.

Both Radhika and myself have experienced problems with our wrists in the early days of our yoga practice, because we over did it with arm weight bearing postures, especially Downward Facing Dog.

### Simplicity is the Key

I would like to give you a few simple tips to improve how you do your yoga arm weight wearing practices and so hopefully help you to avoid problems.

*Please be aware that these tips are of a general nature, and if you are experiencing any problems with your wrists or upper limbs, then for the BEST results, I would advise you to see a physiotherapist, doctor or appropriately qualified health practitioner. They will be able to assess your specific situation and also advise you if something more nasty is going on.*

There may be a number of reasons why your wrists may hurt when you are doing arm weight bearing postures, but I have given 4 main reasons that I see regularly in my classes.

**1.** You already have an existing problem, such as arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome \*, tendonitis, other disease which may be related to work, lifestyle or genetics. In this case you may need to avoid wrist or arm weight-bearing postures, until the problem settles. See your health practitioner for advice. In yoga class let your teacher know your problem.

One possible solution could be to bear weight through your forearms rather than your hands (also try some other solutions given below.) Sometimes people will take the load through their fists, rather than their palms, in order to reduce pain. This may be OK in a low load posture like Cat; however, the fist is very bony with a number of joints exposed, and is generally not designed to take load in an anatomical sense. If you do use this strategy, do it with care. Pad your fist well to spread forces and keep your wrist aligned in slight extension, not flexed.

*\*Note however, that research described in The Journal of American Medical Association in 1998, has shown that gentle specific yoga may be helpful in relieving the symptoms of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. See your Yoga Therapist about this.*

**2.** You have wrist or upper limb weakness and you are doing practices too hard for your strength or staying in the pose too long so you become fatigued. When you are weaker, then you fatigue quicker.

The general principle to getting stronger is SLOW progressive overload. If you go too fast or with too much intensity, your body will break down. It can take many months or even years for your muscles, joints, bones and connective tissue to become strong enough to do more advanced arm weight bearing postures. Also be aware of giving yourself enough rest between arm weight bearing practices, and stop any practice if you feel fatigued or experience pain.

I have listed below one possible progression in intensity of arm weight bearing practices from easiest to hardest. Note - the wrist experiences more strain generally as it extends more.

- Wrist mobility – stretches
- Namaste – pressing palms together
- Staff – pressing palms to floor
- Cat
- Downward Facing Dog
- Plank
- Single Arm Balance
- Upward Facing Dog
- Weight bearing Balance postures – such as Scales and Pendulum
- Crane and variations
- Handstand
- Peacock etc

*Doing an appropriate warm up before your practice can also help as it prepares your muscles to work in the right way to support your body.*

### **3. Poor alignment of the body posture and limbs during arm weight bearing practices can be a major problem contributing to pain or strain.**

A properly positioned body helps to create ease in your body and so also in your mind. Generally postural muscles work best when joints are in neutral. For example the spinal curves are neutral – not flattened or over arched. Proper body positioning is as much about ‘feeling’ as anything. In other words – feeling the line of force is being transferred through the body without causing any strain to the body parts or joints. This is difficult to explain and is best felt by working one on one with an experienced yoga teacher.

For example in Downward Facing Dog, have a sense of transferring the weight through your finger pads to radius (thumb side). The radius is anatomically designed to transfer weight in the wrist not the ulna. Allow the weight to travel up through the elbows, without locking them, into the shoulders. Then feel the flow of weight to the sit bones with neutral natural spinal curves, and then down to the feet. You can gently draw in the belly to help support the spine, but generally this should just happen automatically. The head should stay in line with your arms, lengthened out like the arms, with the chin nodded slightly inward, as this helps to anatomically activate the stomach postural muscles.

### **4. Placing all the weight or pressure on one part of the hand can be particularly painful. This can happen a lot with Downward Facing Dog where all the weight is placed to the heel of the palm and especially the ulna side of the hand (non thumb side). This may lead to nerve compression and even carpal tunnel like symptoms if repeated too often.**

Instead try spreading the weight through the whole hand, and distribute the weight to the finger pads (especially towards the index finger side) away from the heel of the palm. To help achieve this in a posture like Downward Facing Dog you could try placing a towel or blanket just in front of your wrist. This sometimes helps to tip the weight towards your finger pads.

You could also try using a wrist lock – this means to co-contract the muscles on the front and back of your wrist to share the load. You can do this by GENTLY pressing your fingers into the floor. Please note when doing a lock you only use 20-30% effort. If you over do it you will feel too much fatigue. Some people advise spreading the fingers wide, but I personally find it is better to keep my fingers in line with the line of force, ie not too wide.