

CUMULATIVE DAMAGE from HEADSTAND?

(1)

**Basic risk factors and contra indicators
related to the headstand**

(2)

**Details of the potential long-term
problems that may be involved,**

and MOST ESPECIALLY,

(3)

**How to "properly prepare before meeting
such a powerful and influential pose."**

Please note that at the end one may read how this article came about and why it was written in the first place. I was also asked to display a practice on the YOGA for ALL website that you may find at:

<http://YOGAforALL.org/practice/headstand.shtml>

With that in mind, let us continue...

(1) Basic risk factors and contra indicators related to the headstand:

Prominent Scoliosis; stiffness in neck, shoulders or upper back; high blood pressure or real low blood pressure; neck injuries; serious vertigo; prominent spinal defects; disc injuries anywhere in the spine; weak lower back or exaggerated lumbar lordosis; frail upper body; eye diseases; inner ear disorders; complete or maybe even partial

nasal congestion; menstruation or pregnancy; and dental infection would be more or less obvious possibilities to consider for postponing a headstand practice. You may add your own, please. Each person is an individual so the above conditions are guidelines rather than absolutes.

(2) Details of the potential long-term problems that may be involved:

Problems could be as minor as stiffened neck and shoulders, to causing injury to the delicate structures of the neck itself. Long-term cumulative damage of the cervical discs, their nerves and ligaments may go unnoticed for years. This could be because a practitioner believes everything is ok during the practice but doesn't realize why the neck is hard, sensitive or irritated during the day, perhaps there won't be enough sensitivity to notice anything at all.

Sometimes the atlas-axis-occipital connection will be pressurized effecting intricate ligaments and only show irritation when the head is turned during the day. The practitioner may be understandably mystified as to why the neck suddenly, with no apparent reason, has experienced a snap, or an intense heat, that results in a semi-frozen neck for a few hours. Couldn't be from headstand, not crossing their mind, the person may never connect the problem.

(3) How to properly prepare before meeting such a powerful and influential pose:

In preparation one must be patient and be knowledgeable enough to understand that the benefits may not be worth the potential hazards. Before attempting any stays in this posture, (more than one very quick breath) we need to be well versed in the art of sequencing postures. This knowledge of sequencing is actually not acquired in a short time as it can differ with individuals.

The art of proper sequencing presupposes a personal knowledge of counterposes and the specific counterposes needed by the body

and mind of the individual attempting to do shiirshaasana. The counter poses needed must be mastered before shiirshaasana is attempted. This is part of proper sequencing. A practitioner unwilling to respect this is not anywhere near ready to meet this pose and should not be taught, nor encouraged to do it. Counterposes are absolutely necessary because they return the body to a more neutral condition by undoing the strain or stress that the pose could cause whether it is noticed or unnoticed.

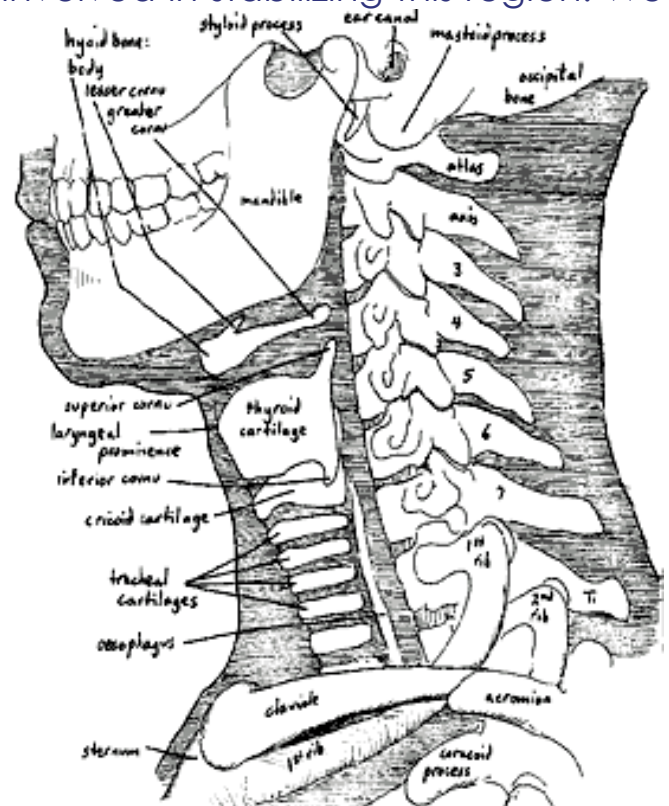
On the other end is the preparation to even do the pose itself. The body must be made strong and flexible by practicing all the other needed poses. This could take years before the practitioner is truly prepared to attempt a safe and worthwhile stay in the pose. We must take good care to condition all aspects of the individual that will be called upon

during the execution of the stay. This is relevant not only over a period of time but also on the day of actual fulfillment of the goal. Do not do a stay in shiirshaasana as your first pose of the practice session. All the years of preparation are reflected in the course of perhaps an hour (+or-) by the few poses that are done just before the undertaking of stay.

Why should we be concerned?

As we study our spine from lower to upper we see that the lower the structure the more stable and supportive it is. When we get to the sacroiliac joint we see that the bones of the spine are fused to each other and mobility is greatly reduced. This is a solid structure ready and able to support the body and it's organs that lie above. As we move upward we see that this condition changes progressively into a mobile and unstable structure. When we enter the cervical spine we see that it only needs to support the head, and that the head has tremendous mobility compared to its lower counterparts. Now at this level the bundled nerves coming out of the brain are far more numerous than what we find in the lower parts of the spine, again a progressive conversion.

the most mobile point of the vertebral column. It cannot be stressed enough the importance of the bones, ligaments and muscles involved in stabilizing this region. We



David Gorman: The Body Moveable

must take diligent precaution not to aggravate the structure and cause

The sub occipital region at the top, which connects to the atlas-axis, is

compression to the nervous tissue in this region. Also we must take in concern for the spinal cord and its cervical and brachial plexuses that will be affected by the sub occipital-cervical relationship.

Consider this...

We have not only turned our world upside down, we have turned our structure around. What was made to be mobile is now called on to be stable, what was made to be stable is now called on to be mobile.

I don't see what the big deal is



"Ben doing headstand"

<http://www.mines.edu/students/b/bliu/head/headstan.html>

For many of us it's not that hard to get up on our head and hold shiirshaasana. What is challenging is to use the part of our body most adapted for mobility in the role of stability without compromising its

What we must counter...

Depends a large part on the individual, but there are strong

The stability of this area and with the cervical column depends on a consistent equilibrium between the posterior and anterior neck muscles along with sensitivity to the complex relationship of all the intricate mobile structures.

delicate design. The head is quite mobile. Look around you, what moves first? Look up, down, right, left, now look up and right, look down and left. Circle your head if you want. The range of mobility of our head is formidable.

Now the stability sector (lower spine, hips & legs) must become mobile (flexible) so as to bring our body back to balance without putting stress on the neck and shoulders. If we just go up into headstand first thing and our lower back, hips and legs are frozen stiff, they will not be able to adjust to a slight change of balance, therefore that stress will be taken into the neck etc. On the other hand, if the lower body is made more flexible, it will sway with the weight changes and cause much less motion to the delicate neck which is now needed for stability.

commonalities assuming that only

persons in proper condition will be considered for the pose anyway.

After the stay in shiirshaasana, no matter how fit we are nor how easily we accomplished the balance, we may have some residue stiffness,

What we must prepare...

We must prepare the breath above all if we are inclined toward the ne plus ultra in meditation, but however you want to look at it, the breath makes or breaks (figure of speech) the posture. The mind must also be prepared to meet the confinement of being locked upside down supported on our delicate structures. Our attention must be keen and alert. We can tune that attention by our sharp choice of postures before crowning of the edifice. We need to know that the neck is strong enough and how to test for that strength. The arms need a certain strength in order to save the neck region in the event of a balance mishap during the stay. The lower back needs to be exercised in both lengthening and strengthening. The legs need to be relatively flexible for the event.

We need flexibility and strength in all these areas so as to be able to extend the spine in its most unsparing verticality. This not only speaks of our natural curves that should be intact but also of the

tightness or rigidity. Certain areas may have overworked and need to be brought back to smooth motion.

The neck; shoulders; thoracic spine; lumbar spine; legs; arms; mind; and breath.

abnormal ones such as minor scoliosis. The trump card for this accomplishment is the use and strategic practice of inhale and exhale in other postures before transferring it over to the headstand. This ability to make use of the breath will enable us to reduce the pressure on the delicate structure of the cervical spine with the atlas-axis-occipital junction. As well as serve as a padding of air to the entire length of the spine, shoulder girdle and skull into the cerebral cortex and nervous plexus. Understanding how inhale lengthens the thoracic curve and how exhale is effecting the lumbar curve is crucial to this relationship of body, breath and mind.

Eventually the pose should become effortless and not require the use of strength at all. The breath will be pumping through and affecting all the systems of the body; muscular, nervous, cardiac, glandular, mental, and our connection to the infinite universe. Approaching the King with such patience and reverence we will be rewarded with a balancing

of our entire being, physical and mental along with our connection to our spiritual nature. We will actually be developing strength in the deep muscles and ligaments of our spine, rib cage, shoulder girdle, and pelvic-leg connection rather than jeopardizing them. It has the power to improve our respiration, digestion, circulation and overall vitality. It stimulates function of the pineal, pituitary, thyroid, and parathyroid glands, which is what prompts the mind to enter the realms of profound meditation. It may even help us sleep better by calming the nervous impulses from the cerebral cortex.



If you already experience a regular practice, ask yourself this question when you are in the pose. "What is the rhythm of my breath." If you don't have an established rhythm, whatever it may be, then you are in serious need of training. [Photo by: Tunney, yogasite]

The pose has profound effects on the breath even if you do nothing to harvest such results. Combined with understanding preparation of breath for the pinnacle, the results could be far more outstanding than we would cognize without such acquaintance. And far less risky on the delicate vehicle that will transport us into the joys, sorrows and wonders of the years ahead of us.

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YOGA for ALL

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How this article came about

In about May 2001 Time Magazine featured model Christy Turlington and her yoga practice. "If you get up in the morning and do a headstand right away, you definitely get the juices flowing," Turlington was quoted.

As a contributor of "ESutra" a newsletter involved in the yoga community of teachers and practitioners I offered the following input:

"Ok, the yoga butt thing was funny. But this isn't. Only a poorly trained practitioner would be sold on the above model. I don't even want to start elaboration of the damage that could be done by following such advice. This is one difficult problem of the yoga boom that needs education, teachers teaching damaging things, perhaps convinced that they are correct and harmless. Allow me to place some doubt in your mind before doing this one. The headstand is the "King" of the Yoga poses. How foolish we are to not properly prepare before meeting such a powerful and influential pose. Even though we are certain that we can do this without problem, if we were only to learn some simple yet focused preparations for the experience of morning headstand, the 'meditation' in the pose would even be keener and less risky. The damage in the pose can be cumulative and unnoticed for years. Yet teachers who just don't understand teach the above model. If one does not understand the possible perils as a result of the above action they should keep the practice to themselves so as to limit the casualties to at best, one."

This response followed: "Paul's warning about the potential long-term negative effects of the headstand is appropriate in the aftermath of Time's article..."

"...But Paul's warning, as written, offers only criticism without foundation..."

"...I'm not saying that he is wrong in his assertion of potential dangers from practicing the headstand, or that the inherent problems might not take years to manifest. In fact, I'm quite sure that most chiropractors, and other spinal experts, would agree with him."

"What I AM saying, is that if Paul is seriously concerned about the inherent risks posed by practicing the headstand (and I believe that he is), then he is seriously negligent for not elaborating on (at least) the following:

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Robert, thank you for asking me to clarify my views on the practice of shirshaasana following my response to the Time Magazine article.

I would not agree I am 'seriously negligent' for not speaking more than I did in the posting. On the contrary I believe that it was quite responsible not to elaborate on a subject before I am specifically asked to do so. Another point that is necessary to bring forth is the need to learn, what you are asking me to portray in a newsletter, from a living, breathing example of the practice.

I hope that this rectifies my assumed negligence. This topic cannot have complete coverage in a newsletter, nor even on a website. I am available to teach in studios and teacher training programs around the country or even around the globe. Headstand may not even be the ideal place to start, however, now you may consider yourself negligent if you don't invite me into your program. :-)

With that in mind, let us continue...

I'd like to thank John Tunney from the yogasite for spending a day taking pictures for the demo part of this project viewable at YOGAforALL.org/ I would also like to thank Robert Wisheart for his prompting me on to write this and Leslie Kaminoff for having open discussions like this on Esutra which was the place this article was first seen. I would like to thank Gary Kratsow and the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram for passing these teachings on to me in the first place.

For a possible headstand practice sequence see:

<http://YOGAforALL.org/practice/headstand.shtml>