SUPPORT AND STRENGTHEN

KEEPING THE SI JOINT SAFE IN YOGA

*The sacroiliac joint plays a quiet but crucial role in stability and movement – yet it's often overlooked in yoga practice. Osteopath and yoga teacher **Anji Gopal** explains how to recognise problems, adapt your teaching and keep this vital joint strong and pain-free*

Yoga is well known for building strength, flexibility and body awareness. But for practitioners with hypermobility or poor alignment habits, certain asanas can sometimes aggravate existing issues – particularly in the joints.

As both an osteopath and yoga teacher, I often meet students whose physical practice, though well-intentioned, doesn't always support the body's structural needs. One area I frequently see affected is the sacroiliac (SI) joint. In fact, SI joint dysfunction may be the source of pain in up to 15-30 per cent of people with chronic lower-back issues – yet it often goes undiagnosed. So what exactly is the role of the SI joint and how does yoga affect it?

The SI joints sit at the base of the spine where the sacrum (the triangular bone at the spine's base) meets the iliac bones of the pelvis. We each have two SI joints – left and right – positioned just in front of the bony dimples at the top of the buttocks.

These joints are designed for stability rather than movement. Acting as shock absorbers, they transfer weight between the upper body and the legs and pass movement from the legs into the spine. Movement here is tiny – only a few millimetres – but is crucial for pelvic and spinal alignment. For example, when you walk, the pelvis subtly shifts from side to side, and the SI joints help to transmit that motion upwards.

WHY SI JOINT PROBLEMS ARISE IN YOGA

The SI joints are reinforced by strong ligaments, but in people with naturally more elastic connective tissue, those ligaments can allow more movement than is ideal. Others may have restricted, or even fused, joints. Ligaments, once overstretched, do not recover like muscles, which means SI pain – whether from excessive mobility or stiffness – can take time to heal.

In yoga, SI problems often develop when certain postures or transitions place uneven strain on the pelvis, often the result of poor alignment or lack of core strength. In my experience, several things

HOW TO STABILISE THE SI JOINT IN YOGA

Yoga's ethical principles – ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness) and dharana (concentration) – are more important than achieving the 'perfect' pose. Here are five tips for a safer practice, so most yogis can practise safely while supporting the healing process.

PRIORITISE SYMMETRY: Choose symmetrical poses to avoid uneven loading on the SI joints. Modify poses like Warrior I to have the hips square to the front of the mat

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY: In poses like Warrior II, adjust your foot placement to suit your pelvis. In my opinion, comfort matters more than classical alignment – and knowing what is comfortable for your pelvis is important.

ENGAGE YOUR CORE: Gentle activation of your core and pelvic floor muscles before moving helps stabilise the pelvis. You might think of them as the Bandhas or in an anatomical way.

KEEP TWISTS AND BENDS MODERATE: Stay away from extreme ranges of motion when bending and twisting – and pay attention to what you are twisting. Is your twist focused on the upper or lower back? And remember, to focus on control, breath and inner awareness.

STABILISE THE PELVIS: Blocks, bolsters, belts and blankets can help maintain alignment and reduce strain. A belt around the pelvis (at SI joint level) can bring awareness and subtle support. A brick between the thighs can align the pelvis as a whole.

contribute to SI discomfort. Asymmetrical poses such as lunges, splits or cross-legged sitting can load one side of the pelvis more than the other. Overstretching can occur when hip movement is mistaken for SI movement, for example by taking the knee too far out in Tree Pose (Vrksasana), pushing the joint beyond its normal range of motion. Deep twists performed without stabilising the pelvis (twisting into the pelvis, rather than rotating around the spine) can create shearing forces, particularly when the arms are used to push even further into the twist. Even transitions – like stepping forward from Downward-Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana) without pelvic awareness – can increase instability.

In short, SI issues in yoga can stem from overuse, asymmetry or instability – all of which can be amplified in a well-meaning but misaligned practice. Furthermore, these issues are even more likely in those with hypermobility, previous injuries, during pregnancy or in the postpartum period.

RECOGNISING JOINT DYSFUNCTION

Understanding the anatomy, causes and warning signs of SI pain is the first step to adapting your practice to support this essential joint – and keep you and your students off the treatment table.

SI joint dysfunction often presents as a dull ache or sharp twinge on one side of the lower back, sometimes radiating into the buttocks, hips or groin (but rarely below the knee). You may notice the pain becomes worse after long periods of standing or walking, when bearing weight on one leg or when moving from sitting to standing.

You may notice discomfort during or after certain yoga postures, too – particularly asymmetrical ones. It is important to differentiate SI pain from other sources such as lumbar disc problems, piriformis syndrome or hip pathology. If you're unsure – or if the pain is sharp, persistent or worsening – consult a healthcare professional such as an osteopath or physiotherapist for diagnosis and guidance.

BE SAFE

Certain yoga poses and transitions increase stress on the SI joint – especially when done without sufficient strength or awareness. These issues often stem from how the pose is performed – rather than the pose itself, but postures to approach with caution include:

Asymmetrical Poses: From Extended Hand-to-toe Pose (Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana) to Head-to-Knee Forward Bend (Janu Sirsasana), uneven weight-bearing can strain the pelvis. Keep awareness of an even pelvis – less is definitely more.
Split-Legged Standing Poses: Warriors I and II (Virabhadrasana I and II), Triangle (Trikonasana) and Revolved Triangle (Parivrtta Trikonasana) may pull the SI joints unevenly, particularly if pelvic alignment is compromised.
Forceful Twists: Using arm leverage in seated twists, e.g. Marichyasana C (Sage Pose C) can over-rotate the sacrum and stress the joint.
Unbalanced Transitions: Moving into or out of lunges or stepping forward from Downward-Facing Dog without pelvic awareness may worsen instability. Notice how you do this simple movement.

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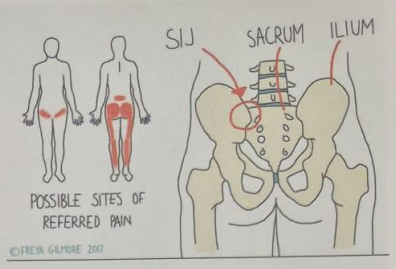
When SI stability is the goal, some poses can be deeply therapeutic for SI joint issues. It is best to focus on symmetrical movements that strengthen the muscles supporting the pelvis and spine. Poses such as Bridge Pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) and Chair Pose (Utkatasana) are effective for building gluteal and spinal strength. Warrior I or Lunge variations (e.g. Anjaneyasana) can be adapted to keep the hips square to the front of the mat, reducing asymmetrical strain. Gentle spinal mobility exercises such as Rolling Cat (Maha-Kriya – moving between Cat and a neutral spine) – can maintain movement without stressing the SI joint.

Build glute strength with Chair Pose



A supported Corpse Pose (Savasana), lying with a bolster under the knees and a strap around the thighs, can help release pelvic tension and promote a neutral alignment. Practised consistently, these approaches can help calm pain and retrain movement patterns for better function.

GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

As teachers, we are responsible for guiding not just the shapes of poses, but also safe and sustainable movement. As a BWY Module leader, I encourage teachers to practice the following principles:

Ahimsa reminds us to respect the body's limits, encouraging students to work within their boundaries. Rather than pushing towards an idealised shape, invite students to explore what feels balanced and stable for them.

Strength should be valued as much as flexibility; active stability protects the joints. Continuing education in anatomy and biomechanics allows us to teach with greater precision, while knowing when to refer students to a healthcare professional ensures they get the support they need.

A therapeutic approach to yoga is not about fitting every body into the same pose, but about listening, adapting and working intelligently with each individual. When we cultivate awareness, adapt practice appropriately and balance mobility with stability, we can keep the SI joints — and our students — healthy for years to come.

Anji Gopal is an osteopath and yoga practitioner who leads the BWY Yoga for BackCare Module. She works to improve back health in person and online. The next Yoga for BackCare Teacher Training runs in November. Find out more at W: backcarefoundation.com