

The Psoas Muscle: Freeing Yourself From The Inside Out

Jon Burras



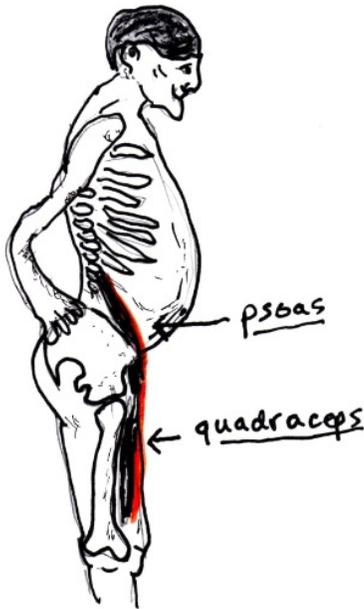
Have you ever wondered which of the 640 muscles in the human body has the most importance? With so many muscles to choose from, it might be hard to surpass the importance of the psoas muscle. The psoas muscle is a vital component in our human structure and in our everyday movement. Because of its vital role in the human body the psoas can be claimed as one of the most important muscles.

The "origin" of the psoas lies deep within the lumbar back, anchoring onto vertebrae T-12 (transverse) all the way to L-5 (lumbar). There are several vertebrae which the psoas anchors onto along the spine. The psoas then travels through the pelvis, atop the front of the pelvic girdle and deep underneath the adductors (groin muscles). The insertion point (or end point) is on the upper inner thigh on a bony protrusion of the femur called the lesser trochanter.

This is just the muscle itself. Connective tissue (or "fascia" as it is sometimes called) will envelope and pass through the psoas. The fascia is like a saran wrap that binds other tissues together. Hence, the fascia of the psoas is glued to the hamstrings in the back of the legs, the adductors inside the legs as well as the diaphragm and heart muscle deep within the thorax of the body. The psoas, just like most other muscles, is not an independent entity but will move when other

muscles move because the corresponding fascia that wraps these muscles together has created a bundling affect.

The psoas is a very important muscle in the body for a variety of reasons. For instance, the psoas connects the lower body to the upper body. From the inner leg all the way to the lower back region the psoas is a stabilizing force in keeping the legs attached to the hips. The psoas is also a very deep core muscle which brings stability to the trunk and the pelvic region. Without the psoas it would be very difficult to lift your leg.



Many people suffer from a misaligned psoas. This could be just on one side of the body or on both sides. Someone who has tight hamstrings from repetitive running might end up with a tight psoas on both sides. The hamstring tightness will lead to psoas tightness. For others tight quadriceps muscles in the front of the thighs will cause the psoas to be tight as the pelvic girdle begins to tip forward pulling on the lumbar back. This often appears as if someone has excess weight that they cannot get rid of but the reality is that their "pelvic bowl" has shifted forward. In a perfect world the tops of the pelvis from the front to the back should be level as if it were a bowl of water. If there is an injury to just one of the quadriceps in front the corresponding psoas on that side of the body will tighten up and pull on the lumbar back. This often results in sciatica pain as the sciatic nerve now becomes inflamed.

Tight quadriceps lead to a tight psoas, shifting the pelvic girdle and causing back pain. Michaelle Edwards elaborates in "YogAlign, Pain-Free Yoga From Your Inner Core" that a tight psoas will cause the pelvis to tilt forward.

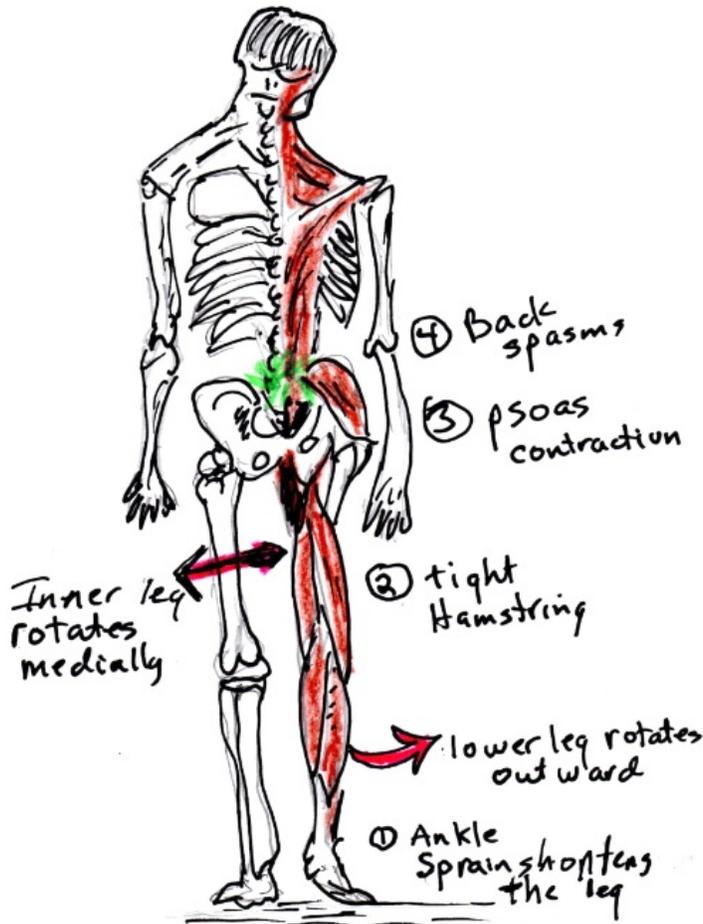
A tight psoas can lead to hip issues as well. When the psoas remains tight the hips can be rotated causing the larger gluteal muscles to tighten or the tiny external rotators like the piriformis to go into spasm. The psoas seldom acts alone but is most frequently activated along with other muscle groups.

A psoas can also be affected by a shortened leg from scar tissue or an old injury in the ankle or knee region. As the lower extremity is forced to hold on and tighten the psoas will tight up as well. Most do not realize that a sprained ankle, plantar fasciitis or a



twisted knee can lead to a tight psoas in the middle of the back.

When a sprained ankle is left uncorrected it often causes the lower leg to rotate outward a slight bit. The upper leg (hamstring and psoas) then will counter rotate inward to try to correct the lower leg rotation. Now you might have pain in your lower back all stemming from an imbalanced ankle.



If there is a lingering ankle injury, what often happens is that the lower leg will rotate outward causing the upper leg to counter rotate inward. The psoas then gets pulled tighter causing pain in the lower back region.

There is a general misconception about how the body actually functions. Most have been taught to believe that the body is a column and your bones hold you up. This is the core myth. These individuals believe that a strong and tight core is necessary to keep the body upright and to keep the back protected. There is nothing farther from the truth.

The core myth is like the leaning tower of Pisa. By propping up the tower you have not fixed the problem. It is still broken and still leaning. By tightening your core you have not fixed a tight psoas, imbalanced



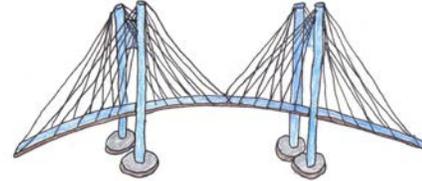
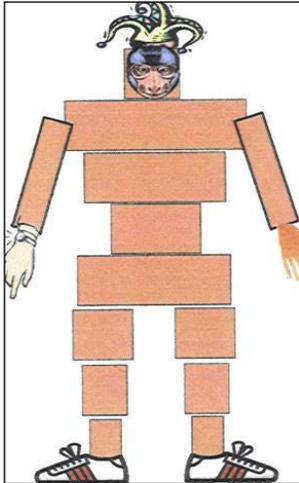
Everything is connected. The fascia will connect all of the muscles from the bottom of the foot to the top of the head. If your foot has a problem it will cause a shortening of your leg, lifting the hip on that side and creating imbalance in the lower back.

Tom Myers explains in "Anatomy Trains" that everything from the bottom of your foot all the way through your brain to the top of your head is connected by fascia.

hips or a shortened leg. The body is still imbalanced. Strengthening the core in an imbalanced structure is foolhardy and will

propping up the tower you have not fixed the problem. It is still broken and still leaning. By tightening your core you have not fixed a tight psoas, imbalanced

The leaning tower of Pisa is like the core myth. By propping up the tower you have not fixed it. By tightening your core you have not cured an imbalanced structure in the human body.



Column Theory

The column model teaches us that pillars hold us upright. Compression and gravity define this model. This is incorrect. Buildings are built this way but not human beings.

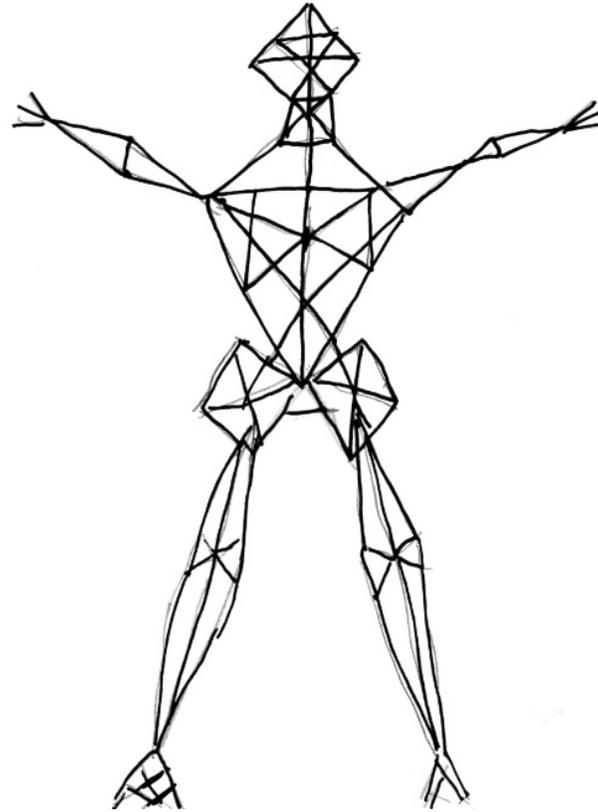
Tensegrity Model

The tensegrity model shows us that tension through cables and pulleys is what keeps us upright like in a tent or suspension bridge.

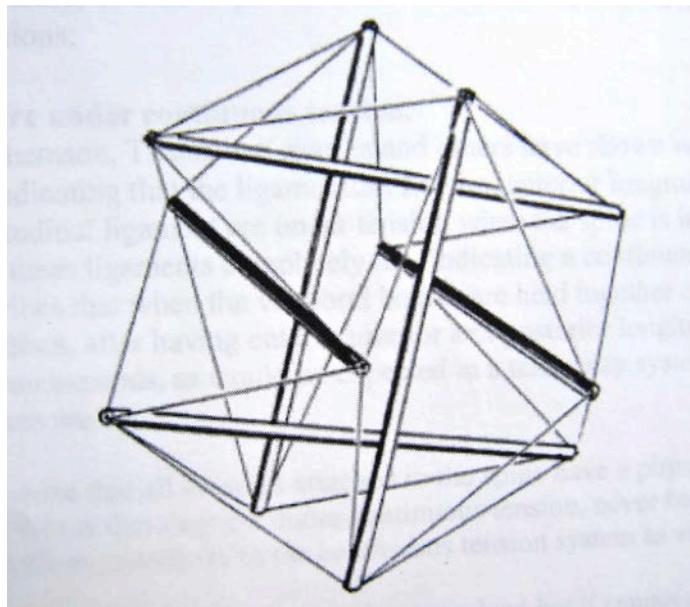
never create balance. You are just buying time until the entire structure completely collapses. We are not built out of columns like in a building of multiple stories. Instead, the body operates much like a suspension bridge or a circus tent. It is the tension in the cables of the bridge or the ropes in the circus tent that actually create the lift to hold the structure upright.

The human body is not a column as the core myth protagonists would want you to believe. This well-entrained model is incorrect and stresses the importance of strengthening the core and the structure in order to hold us upright. This is how buildings are designed and not human beings.

Instead, the body is designed more like a tensegrity model where cables and pulleys are used to keep us upright. The psoas is just one of the tension cables in the human tent. This is a model that is not



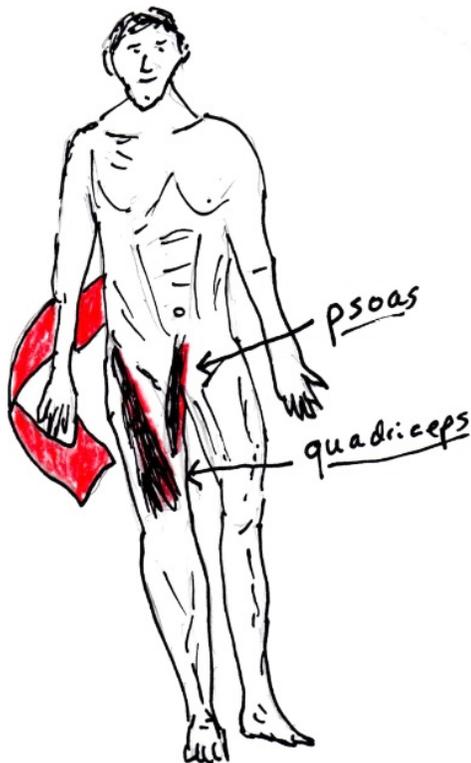
Human tensegrity model



**Tensegrity models are based on cable tension
and not on compression of columns**

based on gravity or strengthening anything but on creating length and proper spacing between each joint. The tensegrity model will move and be flexible (as humans are supposed to be) whereas the column model is rigid and frozen in place.

The psoas muscle is just one of the cables and pulleys in the tensegrity model of the body. It is supposed to be active and dynamic, not rigid and frozen. When you harden your core you create a psoas that is frozen in place. When you continue to stretch and lengthen the psoas you are creating the proper balance and dynamic tone of the body.

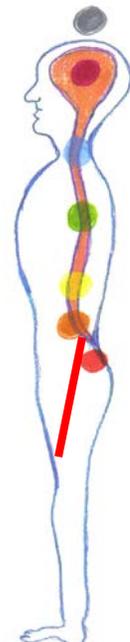


Another common pattern that affects the psoas is an injury to the quadriceps muscle in the front of the thigh. An injury to the quadriceps muscle will cause it to shorten while lifting the corresponding hip up and forward. The psoas muscle on the same side of the body will then shorten while pulling on the lumbar spine. Hence, back pain can also be caused by a tightened quadriceps muscle in front creating a rotation of one hip forward and lifted while the corresponding psoas muscle will contract as a compensation pattern.

As we can observe the psoas works in relationship with many other muscles, ligaments, bones,

tendons and a network of fascia. Tight feet might be enough to create an imbalanced psoas but so can a high ankle sprain, elevated hip, twisted knee, shin splints, knee surgery, calf spasm or quadriceps injury. The fascia pulling through these muscles will link them together. If one part of the structure is off then another part will begin to compensate by tightening up.

The psoas muscle is also a key component in the energetic body. When viewed from an Eastern Hindu perspective the body is seen as a series of energetic wheels, also known as "Chakras". Each energy wheel has a corresponding color, emotion and purpose. The psoas muscle is related to the First Chakra, also known as the "Root Chakra". Imbalances in the Root Chakra often relate to fears of feeling unsafe in the world as one's "Fight or Flight" Response is said to be triggered. An open and



balanced psoas often equates with trusting in the world and feeling safe in one's own skin.

In order to balance the body and in particular the psoas we cannot continue to treat the body as a column that needs to be strengthened. Back issues are usually not beginning in one's core but ending up there. A common mistake when treating the back is to look at the back as the location where the problem is originating from. A mechanistic model will look at an injury sight and just treat that. If you want to be thorough in your treatment you must look at the body holistically and broaden your scope.

The psoas muscle does not exist in isolation but is part of a network of interconnected tissues. Imbalances anywhere in the chain will ultimately affect the psoas. Most lower back pain does not come from the back and most psoas problems originate from someplace else. The psoas muscle is an extremely vital muscle in the human body but it is not acting alone. The psoas is in constant communication with all that is above and below it. If you wish to balance the psoas then you must balance everything else around it.

As the psoas remains vital to our existence we will need to change our perception of who we are. In order to give the psoas its due respect we must begin to see ourselves as a series of cables and pulleys that need to be balanced and lengthened. The old-fashioned perception of ourselves as a stack of blocks being weighed down by gravity is not working. There is nothing wrong with the psoas muscle; it is us who will need to change. How we ultimately perceive and treat the psoas muscle will determine our fate.

Resources

The Vital Psoas Muscle: Connecting Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being, Jo Ann Staugard-Jones

YogAlign, Pain-Free Yoga From Your Inner Core, Michaëlle Edwards

The Psoas Book, Liz Koch

Anatomy Trains, Tom Meyers

Backs Do Not Just Go Out, Jon Burras (article)

<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/BACKS-DO-NOT-JUST-GO-OUT.pdf>

The Core Myth, Jon Burras (article)

<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/The-Core-Myth.pdf>

Pilates is Not Yoga, Jon Burras (article)

<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/Pilates-is-not-Yoga.pdf>

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