

FASCIA

Fascia is the word we use when we describe the web-like system in our bodies. The medical term for Fascia is: “sheets of biological fabric.”

A term for this web-like network never really existed until recently. Now it is referred to as, FASCIA.

Fascia is not a new concept. We have known about fascia a long time but never quite understood what its purpose was— it was just there. Only until recently has science started to look at the body as a whole, where all parts are connected by fascia, right down to the smallest nerve cell. This “new discovery” has turned what we thought we knew about the body, upside down.

*Fascia does not only envelope the whole body, it turns the way we
look at the body upside down*
- Tom Myers

When I took my first yin yoga teacher training, I was told that longer holds, stretch the fascia, joints and ligaments. That’s not necessarily true. We don’t stretch the fascia the same way we stretch a muscle.

I participated in a seminar held by Yoga Alliance and a participant asked: Why do we say the ligaments are stretched when we do Yin Yoga? - that’s madness! Ligaments are supposed to stabilize our body? Arturo Pearl, one of the teachers at the seminar, said that he once asked Paul Grilley about this. Paul answered, “I said it once and then rephrased the statement instead to “we stress, or load the connective tissue to keep it smooth.”

Now, we are talking about “loading” or activating fascia. Research confirms that different types of fascia respond differently depending on the type of load it is exposed to. What a ligament needs to maintain optimal function is not the same as a joint capsule.

For the most part, research says that exercise is needed to maintain healthy connective tissue. A healthy load may be, for example, longer, passive, static stretches, as in yin yoga. But all forms of movement, not just yoga, will help fascia retain its agility.

Static stretching stimulates the superficial fascia that holds muscles together, as well as the deeper muscle fascia. It may sound counterintuitive but the most effective way to perform static stretches is to allow your body the possibility for movement while in a pose. Meaning, do not go into full extension or a full expression of a pose, instead, allow your joints to maintain some range of motion while in a static stretch. Relaxed muscle fibers absorb most of the tissue elongation, but a static, passive load does not affect tendons and ligaments in the same way. Therefore, different types of movement assist different types of stretch. Fascia is trained with everything you do, from cross-fit, to yoga, and even going to your mailbox or sitting on a chair.

There is no evidence that shows you need to stay for a longer hold in a yoga position to influence fascia. That being said, holding a position for a while offers the chance to experience that “aha moment”, where the body can release gripping and the muscles relax.

The deep myofascia (muscle and fascia) within the muscle cannot be accessed until this release occurs. Therefore, staying a little longer, say 2-3 minutes after the “aha moment” happens, is when release can occur.

Fascia is elastic, it can be "stretched", and then returns to its original shape. Imagine a jelly candy that you pull on in order to make it longer (without ripping it). If you walk away and leave it on the table, it will contract and return to its original shape. Fascia elasticity can improve but it does not happen at yoga speed... other kinds of rhythmic movement such as running, is needed for that to happen.

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“For several hundred years, anatomists and surgeons like me have neglected this tissue (Fascia) since it does not seem to be something that is there. But the fact is that it is not just something – it is everything! “

- Dr. Jean Claude Guimberteau

Fascia consists mostly of collagen, a fiber protein that is as strong as steel, yet flexible. Depending on the location of the fibers, collagen can withstand force, tension, torsion, compression, pressure, stretch, and a complicated combination of all of the above.

A distinction is made between superficial and deep fascia:

Superficial Fascia: A connective tissue layer that connects skin to soft parts of the body

Deep Fascia: Muscle fascia (myofascia)

All connective tissue is more or less dry and needs to be hydrated to maintain elasticity. Some people are born with more elastic connective tissue than others. Many factors play a role in fascia health such as life experience, injury, and stress, but also how we have trained the body. Hormones also affect connective tissue.

Fascia is seamless and interconnected. What happens to fascia in one place, affects fascia throughout the entire body.

The ability for connective tissue to change depends on how hydrated those specific connective tissues are. To maintain a certain amount of mobility, practice NOT going to the extreme expression of a pose but stay within 75% of your stretch capacity. This way your body will thank you for that extra hydration it will receive by allowing yourself the ability to move within the position.

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Silence for the mind (and body) can be practiced in other more supported restorative positions.

New studies have also shown that fascia responds to stress and is affected by stress via the autonomic nervous system. For example, fibers in fascia may be affected so that they thicken, and as a result, adhesions occur within the fascia.

Fascia research is ongoing. If you google “fascia”, you will find many different answers and those answers may change because new information is being discovered.

Leading researchers in the world, like Tom Myers and Dr. Jean Claude Guimberteau, are worth checking out if you’d like to find out more, and follow their developments.