



WHAT REALLY HAPPENS IN HIP OPENERS

One of the most common requests heard in a yoga class is “hip openers today please.” This request is usually followed by the other half of the class groaning. We love to hate hip openers yet our bodies crave them and often feel lighter and more open after - for good reason. The majority of us sit for most of our days, shortening the hip flexors at the front of the hip (psoas, rectus femoris, sartorius) and tightening the hip rotators (piriformis, obturator internus, gemellus, to name a few).

A Look Inside the Hip

The hip joint itself is a ball and socket type joint with the head of the femur (thigh bone) sitting in the acetabulum or socket of the pelvis. A variety of muscles attach into the femur starting from the pelvis itself, the lumbar spine, the sacrum, or other parts of the femur. Hip openers could affect any of the muscles surrounding the hip depending on the position of the joint at the time of the pose.

In general when we stretch or open a muscle we are lengthening its position, moving the two attachment points away from each other. This is easy to assess with linear muscles like the psoas which attaches from the front of the lumbar spine, crosses through the pelvis and attaches to the head of the femur. If we flex the hip forward we are shortening the psoas, bringing the two attachments of the muscle closer together. If we extend the hip backwards (such as in the back leg of Pigeon pose) we are opening and lengthening the psoas. The effect becomes greater in King Pigeon pose if we assume an upright posture with our spine so that we lengthen the upper attachment more. In this example we can also rethink our definition of hip openers. Suddenly, poses with a bent knee where we rotate the hip are not the only way to open our hips. If the psoas attaches into the femur, and a shortened psoas tightens our hip (not to mention the affect it has on our low back) then poses like Warrior /Virabhadrasana or Half Moon / Ardha Chandrasana become hip openers too.

Rotate to Open a Rotator?

The rule of how to open a muscle becomes less clear with the hip rotators where the angle of the joint actually affects the action of the muscle. For example, the piriformis muscle attaches from the front of the sacrum to the back of the femur. It acts as an external or outward rotator of the hip. Except if the hip is flexed, then it assists in abduction or sideways movement of the hip. So to follow the rule of opening we would want to internally rotate the femur, flex the hip and adduct or bring the femur towards midline. This can be achieved with the top leg in Marichyasana (sit with your left leg extended, bend your right knee and step the foot across your left thigh so that the femur is flexed, adducted toward midline, and gently

internally rotated.) Other hip openers don't seem to follow the rule of opening. We often externally rotate the hip to stretch the external rotators of the hip. Huh? The reason this works is because we typically flex the hip at the same time.

Use Your X-Ray Vision

To understand how hip openers work we have to picture the position of the muscle. Let's picture the obturator internus muscle, a close friend of piriformis. It attaches from our sitting bone or ischial tuberosity to the greater trochanter of the femur, a bony outcropping on the side of the hip. We can feel both of these pieces of bony anatomy. Our ischial tuberosities can be felt when sitting, they are the bony bits under the flesh of our buttocks. Our greater trochanter can be felt by first finding the top of our pelvis by placing our hands at our waist, firmly pressing in and down until we feel a ledge. This is our iliac crest. Slide your hands down and with your thumb you will feel a bony prominence that is the femur. You can feel it move by slowly rotating the hip in and out. So now we can feel the attachment points for the obturator internus, between the ischial tuberosity or sitting bone, and our femur. From this observation we can see that in a neutral position the muscle wraps around the hip. So if were to flex the hip, the ischial tuberosity scoops under thus increasing the space between the two attachment points and increasing the wrapping distance of the muscle – hence lengthening the muscle. This is why a simple squat (using the term simple lightly) can stretch our hip rotators and can be one of the reasons Westerners find it so challenging to achieve.

Opening Our Hips to Open to Possibility

Since there are many muscles in the hip with many functions depending on the demands we place on our body, keeping these muscles supple can help us in ways that may not seem obvious at first. Hip openers may help us attain a standing pose we've been struggling with, or they may help us get down on the ground easily to play with our kids or our kitten. Traditional yogic thought attributes many healing properties to hip openers from organ issues to sexual dysfunction. So if you are one of the groaners when hip openers are suggested, perhaps pause to wonder if they could be helping you in ways you weren't even aware.

** Sourced from yogaonline*