NEWS LESSON

Tight Hips and Stored Stress: Where the Science Draws the Line



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. In your view, is there a risk in explaining physical symptoms mainly through emotions?
2. Why do metaphors such as "storing" emotions in the body feel so convincing?
3. What would count as good evidence that a part of the body stores emotional experience?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**musculoskeletal**	☐	A	to do with the muscles in the buttocks
2	**plausible**	☐	B	gives permission for
3	**imaging**	☐	C	pictures of the inside of the body, such as scans
4	**systematic**	☐	D	to do with the muscles and bones
5	**gluteal**	☐	E	to do with the structure of the body
6	**licenses**	☐	F	done carefully, in an organised, step by step way
7	**anatomical**	☐	G	seeming likely to be true
8	**irritation**	☐	H	a sore, red or uncomfortable feeling in part of the body

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Experts say stress can raise muscle tension and sensitise people to pain, but find no evidence that trauma is stored in the hips in particular. The advice is to keep moving and to investigate pain that persists.

1 In yoga studios, on TikTok and throughout the wellness industry, one saying has become almost a creed: your hips hold tension. The hips are cast as emotional storage units where old stress and painful memories settle, to be released through the right stretch. When The Guardian put the claim to specialists on 11 October 2026, the response was more measured than the slogan, though it left a grain of truth in the idea.

2 The experts begin with what muscle tension is. It tends to come from one of two sources. The first is mechanical: muscles resist stretch even when relaxed, a property that reflects how tissues are built and used rather than how a person feels. The second is that muscles and nerves remain engaged in low-level activity more often than necessary, which does commonly occur under psychological stress. Neither source maps cleanly onto the sensation people report or its anatomical location, and "tight hips" may describe pain, pulling or stiffness arising from the buttocks or the back.

3 Here the popular claim breaks down. According to the specialists, there is no particular predisposition for stress to tighten the hips. The evidence linking mental strain to musculoskeletal tension is strongest for the shoulders, jaw and pelvic floor, and trauma in childhood is associated with chronic pain and heightened pain sensitivity in laboratory tests, without any sign that the hips are singled out. A systematic review of 28 studies, published in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research in 2016, illustrates both the link and its limits: stress was associated with chronic neck and arm pain, yet the authors judged the evidence too weak to call stress a risk factor. Physiotherapist Greg Lehman sums up the hip position bluntly: there is nothing special about it.

4 Hip discomfort has other plausible roots. Dr Abby Cheng of Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis notes that unusually shallow or deep sockets tend to bring more pain, and that tendon irritation outside the joint is especially common in middle-aged and older women. Clinicians suspect that sitting shortens muscles at the front of the hip, but studies have not conclusively linked short muscles to pain, and a sedentary lifestyle carries many confounding factors. A structural quirk may nudge up the likelihood of pain, whereas stress, poor sleep, inactivity and anxiety often tip the balance.

5 The practical advice is deliberately unglamorous. Move more; if walking or gentle stretching eases the symptoms, they are probably muscular and harmless. Avoid aggressive stretching, which can hurt more than it helps, particularly where socket depth is involved. Aim for regular aerobic exercise and strength training at least twice a week, since gluteal exercises may improve the hips' tolerance for use, and in older adults strength training increases bone density in the hip. Broader health, friendships and meaningful activity may also lower pain sensitivity.

6 None of this licenses ignoring symptoms. If tightness does not improve with movement or worsens with it, a clinician who examines the whole body and asks about stress and sleep is the right next step. Imaging can occasionally help but seldom pinpoints the source, and structure is relevant without being destiny. For discomfort that lingers despite sensible efforts, one expert suggests that making peace with it can paradoxically help.

Sources: The Guardian, Do we really 'hold tension' in our hips?; Journal of Psychosomatic Research, Is there a relationship between psychological stress or anxiety and chronic nonspecific neck-arm pain in adults? A systematic review and meta-analysis. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The 2016 review found an association between stress and chronic neck and arm pain, but its authors stopped short of calling stress a risk factor. T F NG
2. Because childhood trauma is linked to chronic pain, the specialists conclude that the hips are especially affected. T F NG
3. Clinicians suspect sitting shortens some hip muscles, but the evidence that short muscles cause pain is inconclusive. T F NG
4. The text says which exercises best strengthen the gluteal muscles. T F NG
5. Tendon irritation outside the joint is said to be equally common across all age groups and sexes. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

bluntly	creed	heightened	measured	negligible	pinpoints	tolerance	unglamorous

1. Minimalism has become something of a _____ for people who own very little.
2. The minister's _____ response calmed critics who had expected an angry outburst.
3. Chronic lack of sleep can leave people with _____ sensitivity to noise.
4. He put it _____ : the team had simply not done the work.
5. Checking spreadsheets line by line is _____ work, but it prevents costly errors.
6. A single blood test rarely _____ the exact cause of a fever.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Researchers question the _____ of claims that emotions are stored in particular muscles. (VALID)
2. The claim is effectively _____ because nobody can measure stored emotion. (VERIFY)
3. Sensitivity to pain varies _____ between individuals. (CONSIDERABLE)
4. The findings were _____ : some studies found a link and others did not. (CONSIST)
5. Experts urge _____ when a wellness slogan sounds too simple to be true. (CAUTIOUS)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some collocations are fixed or idiomatic. Think of the whole phrase, and watch for a verb or noun that belongs to one particular partner.

contention	credence	havoc	salt	scepticism	speculation	truth

1. A single viral slogan can wreak _____ with the careful message scientists try to give.
2. The slogan about hips holds a grain of _____ , since stress can affect how muscles feel.
3. Wellness advice on social media should be taken with a pinch of _____ .
4. Whether emotions can be stored in a muscle is a bone of _____ between yoga teachers and scientists.
5. One anecdote about a stiff hip cannot lend _____ to such a sweeping claim.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Should wellness teachers be expected to correct popular ideas that science does not support, or is that outside their role?
2. How do you balance taking your body's signals seriously with not worrying too much about every ache?
3. Can a belief that is not scientifically accurate still be useful to someone? Where would you draw the line?

9 Role-play: a hip-opening class

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the yoga fan

Your yoga teacher says your hips hold stress. You want to book a hip-opening class. Explain why you believe it, and try to persuade your friend to come with you.

Student B · the sceptical friend

You've read that there's no good evidence for this idea. Ask your friend two questions about it, and suggest another way to feel better. You can agree, disagree or find a compromise.

Useful phrases

I've heard that your hips hold stress.

That's what my yoga teacher told me.

I'm not sure there's any proof.

Why don't we try a gentle walk first?

If it doesn't get better, we'll see a doctor.

Let's try it and see how we feel.

Afterwards, tell the class: what did you decide, and why?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 G · 3 C · 4 F · 5 A · 6 B · 7 E · 8 H

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 creed · 2 measured · 3 heightened · 4 bluntly · 5 unglamorous · 6 pinpoints

6 Word forms

1 validity · 2 unverifiable · 3 considerably · 4 inconsistent · 5 caution

7 Language focus

1 havoc · 2 truth · 3 salt · 4 contention · 5 credence

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