

## Yoga and stress management

Stress plays a role in disease, although it may not be solely responsible for causing disease or making it worse. The effects of stress have been widely studied and are generally well known. The so-called *relaxation response* that is initiated by yoga practice may very well have a healing effect upon the body. How we ultimately quantify this process is unclear, but yoga has promise as an antidote to stress with positive side effects.

A detailed review and analysis of nine research studies involving yoga and cancer showed moderate improvements in indices measuring sleep, mood, disease-related distress, symptoms related to cancer, and overall quality of life. Though this review outlined the need for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and more evidence corroborating and understanding yoga's mechanisms of action, the authors felt that yoga is a suitable adjunct intervention for cancer patients and survivors.<sup>1</sup>

An RCT that studied 7 weeks of yoga training for breast cancer survivors showed positive changes in emotional function, depression, and reported mood disturbances. Participants in the yoga intervention group showed significant improvement on fitness variables and reported a higher perceived quality of life. The authors of this study also called for more research on the effects of yoga as an adjunct to breast cancer therapy.<sup>2</sup>

An RCT evaluated the effect of yoga practice, including asana, pranayama, and meditation, on stress and perceived quality of life for HIV-positive subjects. Standardized mental

health measures and interviews revealed an immediate stress-relief effect from the yoga interventions, although that effect diminished over time. However, qualitative interviews showed that yoga participants made changes in their daily activities that helped to positively impact stress levels associated with this diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>

A small study compared traditional cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) with sessions of kundalini yoga. A cohort of 26 people was randomly divided into two groups, half of whom received 10 CBT sessions over 4 months and half of whom took part in a kundalini yoga class twice a month for 4 months. By self-report, both the CBT and yoga groups showed improvement in anger, stress levels, and overall quality of life. No significant difference in outcomes between the groups was reported, and because this study was performed at a company, there is no way to know if the improvements were a result of the treatment or perhaps of just being singled out for "special" treatment during the workday. However, there is some evidence that both of these modalities are viable stress management options and should be further explored.<sup>4</sup>

1. Bower JE, Woolery A, Sternlieb B, Garet D. Yoga for cancer patients and survivors. *Cancer Control*. 2005;12(3):165-171.

2. Culos-Reed SN, Carlson LE, Daroux LM, Hatley-Aldous S. A pilot study of yoga for breast cancer survivors: physical and psychological benefits. *Psycho Oncol*. 2006;15(10):891-897.

3. Brazier A, Mulkins A, Verhoef M. Evaluating a yogic breathing and meditation intervention for individuals living with HIV/AIDS. *Am J Health Promot*. 2006;20(3):192-195.

4. Granath J, Ingvarsson S, von Thiele U, Lundberg U. Stress management: a randomized study of cognitive behavioural therapy and yoga. *Cogn Behav Ther*. 2006;35(1):3-10.

## Ready to try yoga? Seven steps to help you get started

There are many styles of yoga that make use of various methods and philosophies, but all forms of physical yoga seek union or balance of the body and mind. A particular style may be unique in its teaching methods, the use of props, or the temperature of the room where classes are held. Many classes offer an integration of styles. Most yoga classes offered in studios and gyms consist of physical poses (also called *asanas*) that may help improve physical strength, flexibility, balance, and mental focus. There is no particular style of yoga that is better than another. Choose a yoga class based on your preferences, fitness level, and goals. Below are some general guidelines that can help you find the class that fits your needs.

### 1. Check with your PA

Yoga poses can be beneficial to both body and mind, but like any form of exercise, yoga may also pose an injury risk. Deconditioned individuals may find some of the more rigorous yoga styles too difficult. Certain asanas could potentially worsen back or neck problems. Some yoga postures and formats are not appropriate in pregnancy. In addition, conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis, and low back pain will require some modification of some of the poses. Your PA will advise you as to whether a yoga program is appropriate for you and which precautions you should take before you start your practice.

### 2. Define your goals

Yoga carries many potential benefits that will differ based on the style of yoga and the experience of the practitioner. Many people wish to practice yoga in order to enhance physical fitness, whereas others are interested in stress management, increased flexibility, or relaxation. Some people might wish to focus more specifically on meditation and the spiritual side of the practice. What are your particular goals? Share them with your instructor, and make sure the class is designed to help you reach them.

### 3. Set realistic expectations

The benefits of regular yoga practice are not instantaneous. At least 8 weeks of training two to three times a week are needed to see measurable changes in strength and flexibility, though you may enjoy the way you feel from a regular practice right away. More rigorous forms of power yoga may enhance your strength but typically do not provide a cardiovascular workout. A traditional hatha yoga class burns about as many calories as a leisurely walk, and even a vigorous power yoga practice is still considered equivalent to a light cardiovascular workout. Although yoga can help improve flexibility, balance, and even core muscle strength, it should be viewed as a part of a fitness program

that also includes appropriate cardiovascular and strength training. Finally, while yoga may indeed help you manage stress and improve flexibility, there is no evidence that it cures any disease.

### 4. Find a class that suits you

Yoga instructors vary in both approach to teaching and personality. There is currently no mandatory national certification for yoga instructors, but ideally your instructor will have several years of experience and will have had some recognized training in his or her area of specialty. He or she

### Types of yoga

The most popular branch of yoga in western countries is known as hatha yoga. Hatha yoga includes physical poses (*asanas*), breathing techniques (*pranayama*), and, possibly, meditation (*dhanya*). Below is a partial list of some of the more common forms of hatha yoga:

**Ananda yoga** uses specific asanas to expand mental awareness. Each pose has an affirmation attached to it, and the focus is on meditation.

**Anusara yoga** is characterized by a philosophy that looks for the good in all people and all things. Students of all levels of ability and yoga experience are honored for their unique differences, limitations, and talents.

**Ashtanga yoga** is often referred to as *power yoga*. This is a physically demanding practice in which postures flow seamlessly into one another with a focus on strength and physical stamina.

**Bikram yoga** is also called *hot yoga*. Bikram is practiced in a room that ranges from 80 to upwards of 100 degrees. Classes consist of 26 poses repeated twice and held for 10 to 90 seconds each. This class requires a certain amount of fitness and stamina, and attention to pose precision is emphasized.

**Iyengar yoga** follows a precise format that utilizes benches, ropes, bolsters, chairs, and other props to help practitioners develop greater symmetry and alignment in their postures.

**Kripalu yoga** format progresses in stages that combine breathing techniques, meditation, mental state awareness, and spontaneous, free-flowing movement.

**Kundalini yoga** Includes chanting, meditation, visualization, breathing techniques, and postures designed to stimulate energy from the spine.

**Viniyoga yoga** is a gentle form of yoga that modifies each pose to the individual student. There is more focus and attention to the breath and a slower pace of poses, as well as an emphasis on biomechanics.

should willingly provide references and answer questions if asked. If you find the instructor doesn't meet your needs, don't hesitate to try another class. The instructor should make you feel comfortable and be willing to help you with your practice, regardless of your level of experience.

### 5. Give yourself time

Once you've found a class and style that feel like a good match for you, know that your first few classes might feel awkward or even frustrating. This is normal as you learn a new physical skill set. Your instructor should be able to guide you through this beginner's stage and help you modify the poses as needed to fit your body. Bear in mind that the benefits of yoga will become evident only if you practice regularly. In time, as you become more familiar with the poses and the breathing, the practice will become more and more enjoyable.

### 6. Listen to your body

Approach your yoga practice with an open mind, but remember that you should not do any pose that makes you physically uncomfortable. There is no perfection in yoga, and ultimately you should never force yourself into a pose that causes pain or discomfort. Yoga class is not a perform-

### Resources

- **Yoga Alliance**  
Provides 200-hour and 500-hour registry marks for qualified instructors. (877) 964-2255 or [info@yogaalliance.org](mailto:info@yogaalliance.org)
- **YogaFit**  
Provides instructor training and referrals, world-wide. Yoga Alliance Approved Courses (888) 786-3111 or [www.yogafit.com](http://www.yogafit.com)
- **Yoga Research and Education Center**  
[www.yrec.org](http://www.yrec.org)

ance but rather an individual journey of mind and body. Take breaks as needed, and ask your instructor to show you modifications for particular poses so you feel more comfortable. Props such as blocks, straps, and bolsters can also be used to help you learn the asanas.

### 7. Practice

Make an effort to find 15 to 20 minutes to regularly practice the yoga asanas that you have learned. Some people prefer attending a class, but others may wish to practice privately. There are DVDs, videos, and books available to help you along with your home practice.

### Prescribing yoga: The importance of instruction

Yoga is a noncompetitive practice and is often described as a balance between effort and relaxation. A well-trained teacher can help patients safely realize this level of awareness and balance.

Depending on the style of yoga taught and the philosophy of the teacher, yoga may be a vigorous or gentle physical endeavor. An adept and experienced yoga instructor can adapt poses (called *asanas*) for a patient of any age, health status, or fitness level. Effective yoga practices can be designed for those who are confined to a chair, young and energetic children, healthy mobile adults, pregnant women, and any other individuals with physical challenges. Smaller yoga studios or one-on-one training with a qualified yoga teacher may be more appropriate for some patients than large classes at a fitness or recreation center where individual attention is not as readily available.

Patients should know that although many of the yoga instructor training programs require that prospective teachers pass a rigorous training course, there currently is no national standard of training for yoga instructors. This means that anybody can teach classes, even if they have little or no training. Although there is some movement in the yoga and fitness communities to hold instructors to a basic standard of training, there are also those who argue that teaching yoga is an art as well as a science and that it would be impossible to unify a teaching approach to the myriad styles and interpretations of yoga.

All patients who wish to start a yoga program should be cautioned that as with any physical activity, there is potential for minor to serious injury from improperly executed

yoga poses. PAs can also help patients choose an appropriate yoga practice. Here are some basic considerations:

**Safety** A good instructor will make it a point to teach proper technique and be able and willing to modify poses for beginning students or students with special needs. For example, a deconditioned, overweight patient with chronic low back pain will need to be shown modifications for forward bends and trunk extensions.

**Education/experience** When evaluating potential instructors, patients should ask if their teacher holds a certification from a nationally recognized yoga training program. Teachers may be associated with The Yoga Alliance or the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Certification from a nationally recognized fitness organization such as the American Council on Exercise, the American College of Sports Medicine, or the Aerobic and Fitness Association of America indicates that a teacher holds basic knowledge of physiology and biomechanics.

Patients should also note that many excellent yoga teachers are available who have no specific certification but instead have years of experience teaching. Patients should ask prospective teachers for references and speak to some of that instructor's students for insight and feedback.

**Overall** Instructors should be friendly, supportive, and welcoming. The class should be well-organized, explanations and demonstrations should be clear, and pose modifications should be provided for students as needed. Yoga teachers should not promote specific diets, prescribe nutritional supplements, or attempt to "treat" any type of condition or injury. In addition, yoga instructors should not push, pull, or otherwise force any student's body into any position.