

Yoga as medicine

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Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning union¹. Yoga may be seen as a philosophy, a way of living or an ancient set of skills. These skills evolved from the need to survive the human condition, evolve spiritually, gain mastery over fluctuations in the mental state and to reach a state of calm². The term yoga does not dictate subscription to a religion or a god¹.

The syncing of the breath to body movement is the foundation of yoga as a form of mindfulness³. Movement is purposeful and draws the practitioner's attention to the breath to bring focus and quiet the mind. Voluntary regulated breathing techniques provide a conscious way to regulate mental and emotional states. This is suggested to have many benefits such as improving attention, memory, reaction time, dexterity and calmness³. Meditation practices, including yoga, have effects on the autonomic and endocrine systems, and areas of the brain involved in emotion regulation, attention and executive functions³.

Yoga is increasingly recognised by western culture as a holistic health intervention for a diverse mix of illnesses including pain, chronic diseases, cardiac rehabilitation and mental illness⁴. As a result there is a growing body of research looking into the health benefits of yoga. This suggests that yoga programs of similar composition and duration improve exercise capacity and health related quality of life (HRQOL) among patients with chronic diseases. They may also be a beneficial adjunct to conventional rehabilitation interventions to improve balance, strength, flexibility, and exercise tolerance. Evidence also suggests yoga increases feelings of calm and connection, thus reducing anxiety and depression⁴.

Mindfulness-based interventions, including yoga, have sound conceptual underpinnings and growing empirical support for aiding addiction treatment, prevention and recovery⁵. A review on yoga for low back pain found strong evidence for short-term effects on pain, back specific disability and global improvement, long-term effects on pain and moderate evidence for a long-term effect on health related

quality of life⁶. Yoga has strong beneficial effects on distress, anxiety and depression, moderate effects on fatigue, general HRQOL, emotional function and social function⁷.

To date there is a dearth of large quality studies on the benefits of yoga. If yoga is going to establish a place in medicine, research must ensure rigorous methodology and reporting. Comparisons need to be made to current therapies and analysis is required of the separate components of yoga to improve the understanding of the underlying mechanism of its health benefits.

In New York Dalia Zwick, a physical therapist and Iyengar yoga teacher incorporates yoga poses into her rehabilitation programs to improve standing postures in disabled patients⁸. Standing yoga poses have assisted her patients relieve habitual postural patterns, improve postural control, increase symmetrical weight distribution, improve steadiness and strengthen reflexive muscle activation. Ms Zwick teaches traditional standing yoga postures using a tilt table or standing frame or in the supine or sitting position transitioning standing over time. She believes the use of yoga asana in her therapies also contributes to a sense of wellbeing, body-mind awareness and calm in her patients⁸.

Yoga can be seen to be a useful adjunct to conventional medicine with the view to reduce lifestyle related illness, lessen the impact of impairment and disability and to improve quality of life and mental health. Yoga is suggested to have strong beneficial effects on distress, anxiety and depression and moderate effects on fatigue, general HRQOL, emotional function and social function. Incorporating yoga into rehabilitation medicine is an exciting and emerging field and I look forward to hearing more about it and being a part of its evolution in my own practice.

References

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