

# Yoga Therapy: Exploring the therapeutic effects of yoga and its ability

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## ABSTRACT

Yoga therapy in its present form is a new discipline, created by the marriage of traditional yoga with modern medicine. It is a specialization of yoga, which tailors yoga practices to the individual needs of people with health problems. It employs simple postural, breathing, relaxation and meditation practices, taking into account medical diagnoses and holistic factors. It emphasizes mind-body integration, extended awareness and the cultivation of a sense of harmony with the rest of life. It is applicable to many chronic conditions and can be used in conjunction with other complementary therapies. Prior experience of yoga is not required. The objective of this study is to assess the findings of selected articles regarding the therapeutic effects of yoga and to provide a comprehensive review of the benefits of regular yoga practice. Therapeutic yoga is defined as the application of yoga postures and practice to the treatment of health conditions and involves instruction in yogic practices and teachings to reduce or prevent alleviate structural, physiological, emotional and spiritual pain, suffering or limitations. Results from this study show that yogic practices increase muscular strength and body flexibility, promote and improve respiratory and cardiovascular function, promote recovery from and treatment of addiction, reduce stress, depression, and chronic pain, anxiety, improve sleep patterns, and enhance overall well-being and quality of life.

**Keywords :** Yoga Practices, Complementary Therapies, Alleviate Structural, Physiological, Alternative Medicine, Holistic Stress Management Technique

## I. INTRODUCTION

Yoga is an old discipline from India. It is both spiritual and physical. It uses breathing techniques, exercise and meditation. It claims to improve health and happiness. Yoga is the Sanskrit word for union. A 3,000 year old tradition, yoga, is now regarded in the Western world as a holistic approach to health and is classified by the National Institutes of Health as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). The word "yoga" comes from a Sanskrit root "yuj" which means union, or yoke, to join, and to direct and concentrate one's attention. Regular practice of yoga promotes strength, endurance, flexibility and facilitates characteristics of friendliness, compassion, and greater self-contr

ol, while cultivating a sense of calmness and well-being. Sustained practice also leads to important outcomes for example changes in life perspective, self-awareness and an improved sense of energy to live life fully and with genuine enjoyment. The practice of yoga produces a physiological state opposite to that of the flight-or-fight stress response and with that interruption in the stress response, a sense of balance and union between the mind and body can be achieved.

Scholars think that yoga was developed by Indian ascetics. Ascetics are people who avoid pleasure. It is a form of mind-body fitness that involves a combination of muscular activity and an internally directed min

dfull focus on awareness of the self, the breath, and energy. Four basic principles underlie the teachings and practices of yoga's healing system. The first principle is the human body is a holistic entity comprised of various interrelated dimensions inseparable from one another and the health or illness of any one dimension affects the other dimensions. The second principle is individuals and their needs are unique and therefore must be approached in a way that acknowledges this individuality and their practice must be tailored accordingly. The third principle is yoga is self-empowering; the student is his or her own healer. Yoga engages the student in the healing process; by playing an active role in their journey toward health, the healing comes from within, instead of from an outside source and a greater sense of autonomy is achieved. The fourth principle is that the quality and state of an individual's mind is crucial to healing. When the individual has a positive mind-state healing happens more quickly, whereas if the mind-state is negative, healing may be prolonged.

Nowadays, many people identify yoga only with asana, the physical practice of yoga, but asana is just one of the many tools used for healing the individual; only three of the 196 sutras mention asana and the remainder of the text discusses the other components of yoga including conscious breathing, meditation, lifestyle and diet changes, visualization and the use of sound, among many others. In Yoga Sutras, Patanjali outlines an eightfold path to awareness and enlightenment called ashtanga, which literally means "eight limbs".

The eight limbs are comprised of ethical principles for living a meaningful and purposeful life; serving like a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline, they direct attention towards one's health while acknowledging the spiritual aspects of one's nature. Any of the eight limbs may be used individually; however within yoga philosophy the physical postures and breathing exercises prepare the mind and body for meditation and spiritual development. Based on Patanjali's eight limbs, many different yogic disciplines have be-

en developed. Each has its own technique for preventing and treating disease. In the European country, the most common aspects of yoga practiced are the physical postures and breathing practices of Hatha yoga and meditation. Hatha yoga increases the capacity of the physical body through the use of a series of body postures, movements (asanas), and breathing techniques (pranayama). The breathing techniques of Hatha yoga focus on conscious prolongation of inhalation, breathe retention and exhalation. It is through the unification of the physical body, breath, and concentration, while performing the postures and movements that blockages in the energy channels of the body are cleared and the body energy system becomes more balanced. Although many styles of Hatha yoga exist, the majority of studies included in this manuscript utilized the Iyengar style of yoga. The Iyengar method of Hatha yoga is based on the teachings of the yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar yoga places an emphasis on standing poses to develop strength, stability, stamina, concentration and body alignment. Props are utilized to facilitate learning and to adjust poses and instruction is given on how to use yoga to ease various ailments and stressors.

Yoga is recognized as a form of mind-body medicine that integrates an individual's physical, mental and spiritual components to improve aspects of health, particularly stress related illnesses. Evidence shows that stress contributes to the etiology of heart disease, cancer, and stroke as well as other chronic conditions and diseases. By reason of the fact that stress is implicated in numerous diseases, it is a priority to include a focus on stress management and reduction of negative emotional states in order to reduce the burden of disease. Viewed as a holistic stress management technique, yoga is a form of CAM that produces a physiological sequence of events in the body reducing the stress response. The scientific study of yoga has increased substantially in recent years and many clinical trials have been designed to assess its therapeutic effects and benefits.

As participation rates in mind-body fitness programs such as yoga continue to increase, it is important for health care professionals to be informed about the nature of yoga and the evidence of its many therapeutic effects. Therefore, this review of the literature is timely and important and provides information regarding the therapeutic effects of yoga in different populations concerning a multitude of different ailments and conditions. Therapeutic yoga is defined as the application of yoga postures and practice to the treatment of health conditions. Yoga therapy involves instruction in yogic practices and teachings to prevent, reduce or alleviate structural, physiological, emotional and spiritual pain, suffering or limitations. Yogic practices increase muscular strength and body flexibility, promote and improve respiratory and cardiovascular function, promote recovery from and treatment of addiction, reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain, improve sleep patterns, and enhance overall well-being and quality of life.

## II. THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF YOGA:

Yoga exercise aims to improve strength, flexibility and breathing, while at the same time helping with physical health and mental wellbeing. In health terms, yoga can help develop flexibility, suppleness and muscular strength without causing strain, increase energy levels and help to tone the body. "The purpose of yoga is to create strength, awareness and harmony in both the mind and body," health Benefits. Here, the benefits of yoga information is grouped into three categories—physiological benefits, psychological benefits, biochemical effects—and is based on the regular practice of traditional āsana, prānāyāma, and meditation

- **Physiological Benefits:** Stable autonomic nervous system equilibrium, with a tendency toward parasympathetic nervous system dominance rather than the usual stress-induced sympathetic nervous system dominance. Physiological Benefits are- Pulse rate decreases, EEG - alpha waves increase, EMG activity decreases, Cardiovascular efficiency increases, Gastrointestinal function norma-

lizes, Respiratory rate, decreases, Blood pressure decreases, Excretory functions improve, Galvanic Skin Response increases, Respiratory efficiency increases (respiratory amplitude and smoothness increase, Endurance increases, Energy level increases, Weight normalizes, Sleep improves, Immunity increases, Pain decreases, tidal volume increases, vital capacity increases, breath-holding time increases), Endocrine function normalizes, Musculoskeletal flexibility and joint range of motion increase, Posture improves, Strength and resiliency increase.

- **Psychological Benefits:** Somatic and kinesthetic awareness increase, Mood improves and subjective well-being increases, Self-acceptance and self-actualization increase, Social adjustment increases, Anxiety and depression decrease, Hostility decreases. **Psychomotor functions improve:** Grip strength increases, Depth perception improves, Eye-hand coordination improves, Choice reaction time improves, Steadiness improves, Balance improves, Dexterity and fine skills improve, Integrated functioning of body parts improves. **Cognitive function improves:** Attention improves, Concentration improves, Memory improves, Learning efficiency improves, Symbol coding improves, Depth perception improves, Flicker fusion frequency improves.
- **Biochemical Effects:** The biochemical profile improves, indicating an antistress and antioxidant effect, important in the prevention of degenerative diseases. Biochemical Effects are- Glucose decreases, Thyroxin increases, Vitamin C increases, Oxytocin increases, Hemoglobin increases, Lymphocyte count increases, Sodium decreases, Total white blood cell count decreases, Total serum protein increases, Prolactin increases, Oxygen levels in the brain increase Total cholesterol decreases, Triglycerides decrease, HDL cholesterol increases, LDL cholesterol decreases, VLDL cholesterol decreases, Cholinesterase increases, Catecholamines decrease, ATPase increases, Hematocri-

t increases.

### Yoga's Benefits across Ages

- **Young Children:** Introducing your children to yoga at an early age can help them learn healthy lifestyle habits and set the foundation for a fit future. All the way through yoga, kids can improve their body and mind connection. Your child will grow up to be conscious of his or her health and general wellbeing. Living a healthy lifestyle, when learned at an early age, offers many advantages. Who doesn't want a healthy and fit kid? When a child is into yoga, he or she is taught to see the light and beauty from within. Your child will become more confident and develop the needed skills to achieve overall wellness and optimum health. Yoga is particularly helpful for children with developmental disorders like Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and autism. Even kids with ADHD and other learning disabilities have found great success in yoga. What's more, children possess one major advantage over adults in their yogic practice: they are a lot more flexible. Therefore learning the poses and yoga techniques is easier and fun for them.
- **Tweens & Teenagers:** Yoga is an easy sell to preteens and teens, but actually practicing with consistency—and this is the case for any of us really—is the key to making a difference. One minute you have a sweet child willing to spend all their free time with you, and hanging on to your every word adoringly. The next minute, you have a tween (not a child, but not a teenager yet) mumbling under their breath, pushing boundaries, and breaking rules. No longer are you the all-knowing parent; you've just been replaced by peers, social media, and celebrity pop stars. But there are ways to get around this. After all, your tween (aged 10 to 12 years) is in a transitional phase that can be difficult to decipher.
- **Seniors:** Many elderly folks are forced to give up their fitness regimes as they get age, particularly high impact sports like running, basketball, an

d skiing. Yoga classes are a healthy, low-impact way for seniors to stay active and physically fit. A good senior class will be geared specifically towards the needs of older students, and will include poses that are doable. There are several mind-body health benefits from senior yoga.

### Yoga for Different Phases of Life:

- **Women's Health:** Most women suffer from menstrual pain every month. With hormones already creating chaos in your system, these crippling cramps may make it very difficult to even get through a normal day. While pain medication can give relief, it can also make you irritable and drowsy. The good news is that there's a better way to deal with this monthly trauma. Certain yoga poses have the power to relieve your menstrual pain, fatigue and irritability.
- **Menopause:** Just like menstruation, menopause is also a part of every woman's life from which there is no running away. As menopause sets in and your raging hormones wreak havoc inside your body, every day becomes an adventure as well as a challenge. With nightly hot flashes, increased irritability and anxiety, painful menstruation and intercourse, every menopausal woman struggles on a daily basis. If you do not wish to take the conventional route of hormonal therapy to get rid of your moodiness, you may want to consider a yoga practice. Simple yoga poses can calm your nerves, relax your mind and also get rid of unpleasant menopausal symptoms.
- **Romantic Relationships:** It's no secret that yoga can improve your sex life, thanks to being a very effective stress reliever. Certain postures can also tone your body, improve blood circulation and ramp up your physical energy, all of which work for a hot sex life. Consequently if you want to rev things up in the sack, yoga might just be the answer.

**Yoga vs. Traditional Forms of Exercise:** In spite of the increasing popularity of yoga and the wide range of benefits associated with it, there is some question whether it can compete with traditional forms of exercise. In a recent review article, Ross and Thomas compared the benefits of yoga and the benefits of traditional exercise on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) in both healthy and diseased populations. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ross and Thomas found that the benefits of yoga are equal or superior to traditional exercise. They suggest that yoga is a preventive and curative approach for combating chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disorders, diabetes, obesity and mental illnesses. According to Ross and Thomas, yoga practitioners display similar or more desirable levels of blood glucose, blood pressure, inflammation, salivary cortisol, cholesterol, oxidative stress and heart rate when compared to practitioners of the more traditional forms of exercise. Additionally, subjective appraisals of pain, anxiety, fatigue, stress, mood and sleep were improved with yogic intervention. Both yoga and traditional exercise affect the HPA and SNS continuums; On the other hand, yoga instigates a shift in the nervous system response that favors the parasympathetic nervous system while concurrently soothing the SNS.

### III. THE GOALS OF YOGA

One of the main goals of yoga is to achieve tranquility of the mind and create a sense of well-being, feelings of relaxation, improved self-confidence, improved efficiency, increased attentiveness, lowered irritability, and an optimistic outlook on life. The practice of yoga generates balanced energy which is vital to the function of the immune system. Yoga leads to an inhibition of the posterior or sympathetic area of the hypothalamus. This inhibition optimizes the body's sympathetic responses to stressful stimuli and restores autonomic regulatory reflex mechanisms related to stress. Yogic practices inhibit the areas responsible for fear, aggressiveness and rage, and stimulate the rewarding pleasure ce

nters in the median forebrain and other areas leading to a state of bliss and pleasure. This inhibition results in blood pressure, heart rate, lower anxiety, respiratory rate and cardiac output in students practicing yoga and meditation.

Consistent yoga practice improves depression and can lead to significant increases in serotonin levels coupled with decreases in the levels of monoamine oxidase, an enzyme that breaks down neurotransmitters and cortisol. A range of therapeutic approaches is available for the management of depressive disorders, however many patients turn to complementary therapies because of the adverse effects of medication, lack of response or simply preference for the complementary approach. A number of studies demonstrate the potential beneficial effects of yoga interventions on depression, stress, and anxiety.

There is one of the first and most obvious benefits of yoga is improved flexibility. With continued practice comes a gradual loosening of the muscles and connective tissues surrounding the bones and joints; this is thought to be one reason that yoga is related to reduced aches and pains. Yoga helps to build muscle mass and/or maintain muscle strength, which protects from conditions for example arthritis, osteoporosis and back pain. During a yoga session, the joints are taken through their full range of motion, squeezing and soaking areas of cartilage not often used and bringing fresh nutrients, oxygen and blood to the area, which helps to prevent conditions like chronic pain and arthritis. Without proper sustenance, neglected areas of cartilage will ultimately wear out and expose the underlying bone. Numerous studies have shown that asana, meditation or a combination of the two reduced pain in people with arthritis, Carpel Tunnel syndrome, back pain and other chronic conditions. Yoga also improves balance.

Yoga increases blood flow and levels of hemoglobin and red blood cells which allows for more oxygen to reach the body cells, enhancing their function. Yoga also

thins the blood which can decrease the risk of stroke and heart attack, as they are frequently caused by blood clots. Twisting poses wring out venous blood from internal organs and allow oxygenated blood to flow in when the twist is released. Inverted poses encourage venous blood flow from the legs and pelvis back to the heart and then pumped all the way through the lungs where it becomes recently oxygenated. Many studies show yoga lowers the resting heart rate, increases endurance, and can improve the maximum uptake and utilization of oxygen during exercise. Consistently getting the heart rate into aerobic range lowers the risk of heart attack. While not all yoga is aerobic, even yoga exercises that do not increase heart rate into the aerobic range can improve cardiovascular functioning.

#### IV. LIMITATIONS OF YOGA PRACTICE

The all-encompassing nature of yoga has the tendency to draw in widespread appeal. Its positive track record and long-term success in impacting health has provided evidence that yoga is becoming more than just a trend. As the interest in yoga continues to grow, however, a few questions have begun to arise. First, critics question whether the benefits attributed to yoga are real, perceived, or both. Additionally, opinions have varied between yoga practitioners and non-practitioners, raising concern about the effects of yoga. And, finally, some have recognized barriers that prevent individuals from practicing yoga.

A qualitative study was conducted by Atkinson et al., in an attempt to answer these emerging questions and to define and compare the pros, cons, and triggers related to adopting (or negating) yogic practice while being mindful of experience levels and the impact of experience on decision-making. Atkinson et al., recruited fifty participants and assigned them to groups according to their level of experience with yoga: non-practitioners, beginners (one year or less), and intermediates (more than one year). Perceived benefits, barriers, and other factors of yoga practice were discussed throughout f

ocus group sessions and revealed that the initiation of yoga therapy is most often prompted by illness onset, injury rehabilitation, disease prevention, word of mouth and mass media. Participants noted stress reduction as the primary benefit of yoga practice as well as maintaining personal health, deterring mind/body disease, encouraging social support, and gaining self-acceptance. Time constraints was the primary perceived barrier to engaging in yoga practice, while monetary costs, stigmas related to practicing yoga, feelings of intimidation, and the potential for adverse health effects, even though rare, discouraged yoga practice.

#### V. METHODS

In order to locate research studies and interventions that examined the therapeutic effects of yoga, databases were searched through Google Scholar via a universities web browser. Firstly, the following key words were entered into the database via the advanced search option: "yoga," and "therapeutic effects." This search was conducted to obtain general information regarding yoga's therapeutic effects in the existing literature. Afterward, a second search was conducted using the following key words or exact phrases, "hatha yoga," "therapeutic effects of yoga," "stress," "anxiety," "depression," "pain," and "chronic disease." The following criteria were used for including studies in this review: (1) the article had to be peer reviewed, (2) published between the years 1990 and 2009, (3) the intervention had to incorporate some form of yoga and/ or meditation, and (4) effects of yoga on some outcome were measured.

With the intention of select the articles included in this manuscript, many steps were taken. First, the title was read. If the article appeared appropriate to the examination of the therapeutic effects of yoga, it was saved to a folder. The articles describing interventions that utilized yoga as a means to achieve some health outcome were chosen for further review. Each of the articles chosen were then thoroughly read and reviewed. The articles chosen include a broad spectrum of the benefits, application, and therapeutic effects of yoga.

## VI. RESULTS

Mental health problems for example anxiety, stress, depression and insomnia are among the most common reasons for individuals to seek treatment with complementary therapies like as yoga. Yoga encourages one to relax, slow the breath and focus on the present, shifting the balance from the sympathetic nervous system and the flight-or-fight response to the parasympathetic system and the relaxation response. The latter is calming and restorative; it lowers breathing and heart rate, decreases blood pressure, lowers cortisol levels, and increases blood flow to the intestines and vital organs.

While yoga is not a cure for a cancer or a definitive way of preventing it, yoga increases physical, emotional and spiritual wellness, and brings about a certain peace, of which many cancer patients desire. Yoga, breathing exercises, and meditation can reduce stress, promote healing, and enhance quality of life for patients with cancer. The growth of tumors and other cancer indicators are exacerbated by stress, thus it is especially important for people with cancer to reduce and manage stress effectively. Several premises exist as rationale for applying yoga-based interventions with cancer patients. Research suggests that yoga can produce an invigorating effect on mental and physical energy that improves fitness and reduces fatigue. Moreover, when practicing yoga, a fundamental emphasis is placed on accepting one's moment-to-moment experiences creating mindfulness and not forcing the body past its comfortable limits. Having this healthy sense of acceptance is especially important for individuals dealing with life-threatening illness as it decreases the stress one experiences from unpleasant symptomology. Primarily, cancer patients likely benefit from the poses themselves which are designed to exercise each and every muscle, nerve and gland throughout the body. The postures precisely address the tension, holding, and blockage of energy in any particular joint or organ. As this tension is released, energy flows more readily all the way through t

he body and allows patients to experience a sense of increased well-being and strength in addition to a balance of mind, body and spirit.

While stimulation is good, too much taxes the nervous system and yoga provides relief from excess stimulation and the stressors and hectic nature of modern life. Restorative postures, savasana, pranayama, and meditation encourage pratyahara, a turning inward of the senses which enables downtime for the nervous system, the byproduct often being improved sleep. Pharmacological treatment of insomnia is often related to hazardous side effects for example states of confusion, psychomotor performance deficits, nocturnal falls, dysphoric mood, impaired intellectual functioning and daytime sleepiness, mainly in older adults. Consequently, alternative forms of therapy for improving sleep are becoming utilized more frequently. These alternative therapeutic approaches can be generally classified into three categories: behavioral based educative methods (e.g. avoiding caffeine or other stimulants before bedtime), relaxation techniques (e.g. progressive muscular relaxation, yoga, and meditation) and formal psychotherapy. Because of its ability to increase relaxation and induce a balanced mental state, yoga has been studied to evaluate its possible effects on sleep and insomnia.

Briefly, stress has a negative impact on the immune system and prolonged exposure increases susceptibility to disease and leads to physical and mental health problems like as anxiety and depression. Practicing yoga and meditation as a means to manage and relieve both acute and chronic stress helps individuals overcome other co-morbidities associated with diseases and leads to increased quality of life. As a non-pharmacological form of treatment, yoga based interventions are an alternative option for the treatment of mood disorders. Further investigation of yoga as a therapeutic intervention in depressive disorders is required and future studies should seek to identify which of the yoga-based interventions is most effective and what levels of severity of depression are more likely to respond to this approach

As well as the effects of yoga on mood disorders and stress reduction, yogic practices are shown to improve cardio respiratory performance, psychological profile, and plasma melatonin levels and also significantly reduced systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, mean arterial pressure, and orthostatic tolerance. In addition, yoga helps to improve the cardiovascular efficiency and homeostatic control of the body and results in improvements in respiratory performance, autonomic balance and overall well-being. Yoga based lifestyle modifications were also shown to aid in regression of coronary lesions in addition to improve myocardial perfusion in patients with CAD. Unavoidably, cardiovascular parameters alter as one ages, but these age-related deteriorations in cardiovascular functions are slower in persons who practice yoga regularly as yoga practitioners had lower heart rate with lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure than matched controls.

According to Buddhist philosophy the roots of addiction are in the mind and the practice of mindful meditation encourages addicts to accept the basic impermanence of human experience and helps them to develop a detached awareness of thoughts. Yoga and meditation practices exert positive influence on addictive behaviors. From beginning to end the practice of yoga, addicts shift from self-inflicted harm and disrespect toward their bodies to more respectful, caring, and loving behaviors. Eating disorders are a specific type of addiction and yoga appears to be beneficial in improving body image disturbances and useful in the recovery from eating disorders.

There are one study found that female yoga practitioners attribute their positive feelings and sense of well-being to yoga practice and report less self-objectification, greater satisfaction with physical appearance and fewer disordered eating attitudes compared to non-yoga practitioners. The findings of the aforementioned studies examining the psychological and physical outcomes of yoga prove difficult to summarize and draw concrete conclusions because of variation in the research d

esigns, differences in the duration and frequency of yoga classes, and differences in the specific yoga programs and populations being studied. However, results for the included studies demonstrate many of the numerous therapeutic effects, benefits and profound healing power of yoga.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Yoga is more than just exercise. It is a useful supplement to traditional medicine when integrated as part of a holistic health routine; however, current literature is limited. Additional research on the health benefits of yoga is warranted, and replications using various populations are needed to substantiate health claims in current literature. Yoga can be viewed as a reliable and safe form of complementary and alternative medicine in Western culture today. Yoga has promising potential for healing with documentation to support its ability to ameliorate maladies across the medical spectrum. The evidence presented here clearly suggests the inherent link that exists among one's body, mind, and spirit. By clarifying this important connection, we can begin to identify the proper use of yoga in holistic health routines for years to come.

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