

Yoga and Multiple Sclerosis

What is yoga?

Yoga philosophy was developed thousands of years ago, but the physical poses we do are probably not that old. Yoga means to yoke or unite. It is the bringing together of the mind and body, often by focusing on the breath while holding or moving through various physical postures.

What the research says:

There is not a lot of hard data about the benefits of doing yoga for people with MS. However, one important recent study was done right here in Portland, at OHSU. Researchers studied 69 people, randomized into three study groups for six months. One group took a weekly Iyengar yoga class. A second group took a weekly exercise class. The third group continued with their normal activities. Cognitive function, fatigue, mood, and quality of life were examined. Significant improvements in fatigue were found in both the yoga and exercise groups. (See Barry Oken's research at OHSU for further information.)

Another exploratory study of 59 people with MS found that "yoga practice had improved coordination, circulation, fatigue, flexibility, and general mobility." This study also claims the practice of yoga led to "decreased stress, an increased sense of well-being, calmness, and improved self-esteem." (See Ada-Reva Franklin's article for further information.)

Almost all the other research on yoga and MS involves only case studies of individuals. For example, in 2001 a nursing student wrote her master's thesis based on two case studies of individuals with MS doing yoga. Both participants had "affirming life philosophies, strong motivators, an ongoing development of body awareness, and the ability to think and act outside the norm." Yoga helped the two become less competitive and stressed. They felt they had greater control over their lives and their bodies. And the yoga helped them deepen their relationship to God. (See Ada-Reva Franklin's article for further information.)

One reason for the lack of hard data on this topic may be just the nature of the beast. After all, how can one conduct a "double-blind" study with "sham" yoga? Another problem is the narrowness of traditional research. For example, in a study of asthma and yoga, the patients' quality of life/sense of well-being improved more than their pulmonary condition. (*Yoga Journal* Source 2001, p.88+) One might interpret this to mean that yoga doesn't work as an asthma treatment. However, previous research has shown that asthma is more likely to kill patients who have negative attitudes and poor self-image, so improvements in well-being do have a powerful effect on people with asthma. The same is probably true for people with MS too.

A second problem with doing research on yoga and multiple sclerosis is the broad range of activities called yoga. There are probably as many types of yoga as there are

variations in people with MS. So for anyone interested in finding a yoga teacher, we offer the following advice.

What to look for in a yoga class:

- Accessible bathrooms and classroom
- Not overheated (temperature somewhat in your control; for example, windows that open)
- Props available (including wall space, chairs, blankets, straps, etc.)
- Clean, swept floors
- Fresh air
- Quiet space
- Emphasis on nurturing, not on appearances (e.g. mirrors are not helpful; notice if there are students of all sizes, all ages.)
- Not so large that you can't get personal attention (this will depend partly on the skill of the instructor). For example, in a class for people with special needs, 10 is a fine size; with 15 students it is nice to have an assistant.

What to look for in a yoga instructor:

- How long has the instructor had a personal, daily yoga practice? (I'd suggest a minimum of 5 years)
- What is the teacher's background in anatomy? They may have a dual career as a PT or OT or massage therapist. Or they may have taken special anatomy classes as part of yoga teacher training.
- Do they have any knowledge of working with people with MS? If not, are they willing to admit that they need to do some research into the disease in order to teach you properly?
- Does the instructor inquire about your health in general? They should know if you have any injuries, if you are pregnant, if you have high blood pressure or other conditions.
- Is the teacher certified, and if so, what does the certification mean? For example, Iyengar yoga certification is quite rigorous; some other places give out certificates for just a weekend of teacher training.

Take a sample class to assess:

- Does the teacher describe each pose before you do it, telling you how to avoid strain and how to correctly align yourself?
- Does the teacher encourage resting between poses (this is good), or does he/she push you to stretch further and strengthen faster? (This can be dangerous.)
- Does the teacher encourage the use of props to avoid fatigue and over stretching?
- Does the teacher take time to offer modifications to poses or alternate poses?
- How do you feel a day or two after the class?
- Each teacher is unique. Does he/she listen well? Do they want to show off or is the focus on the students? Do you feel good about yourself in the teachers' presence?
- Does the teacher know how to adjust students safely, keeping the relationship professional rather than personal or sexual?

- Does the teacher encourage you to do yoga at home?
- Do you feel attended to without feeling singled out?
- Are scholarships available?
- Does the class feel safe? For example, are you allowed to use a wall to help balance in standing poses? Or to use a chair?
- Does the teacher bring any yoga philosophy into the exercise class? This might include promoting breath awareness, encouraging a sense of contentment in the students, or teaching exercises to quiet the mind.
- Does the teacher express a positive attitude?
- Are you given more than one chance to try a pose?
- Is the class confusing?
- Does the teacher explain the difference between healthy stretching in the muscles versus unhealthy stretching? For example, sharp, shooting pain or any pain at all in the joints is unhealthy.
- Does the class end with quiet poses? You should never leave feeling jittery or nervous.

What types of yoga are appropriate, or not?

Certain types of yoga are less appropriate for people with MS. **Avoid:**

- Power yoga or ashtanga yoga: These involve flowing from one pose to another, with an emphasis on strength building rather than on listening to the body.
- Bikram yoga is done in a hot room.
- Kundalini yoga emphasizes intense breath work with may not be appropriate for people with MS.
- Hatha yoga is a generic term for the physical yoga taught in the United States. It won't tell you much about the class, so ask for more details.

Yoga that is likely to be more appropriate includes:

- Iyengar yoga (the type studied in the OHSU study on MS and yoga.)
- Integrative Yoga Therapy is designed specifically for medical and wellness settings. It includes guided imagery, gentle postures, and breath work.
- Viniyoga is tailored to meet individual's needs. It involves gentle poses coordinated with breath work.
- Svaroopa yoga focuses on the opening of the spine. It incorporates poses with anatomy and philosophy.
- Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy combines classical yoga with contemporary body-mind psychology.

Certain types of yoga, such as Sivananda, Integral Yoga, Ananda, and Tibetan yoga, place more emphasis on achieving "enlightenment", but may still include physical postures. Kripalu and Anusara yoga can both be gentle forms of yoga. To learn more see *Yoga Journal* Winter 1999 issue 149, p. 14+

Why do yoga?

You may be wondering, if there is not a lot of research about yoga and MS, and the process of finding an appropriate teacher sounds complex, why bother? Here is where we turn to the anecdotal information provided by individuals with MS.

Based on surveys done by the Portland Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, yoga students found:

- 98% increased their flexibility
- 94% had more energy
- about 92% had an increase in stamina
- 92% had an increase in strength

As well as the above effects, I personally have seen students feel less depressed and less stressed; develop better sleep and relaxation abilities; get some pain relief; and develop an ongoing commitment to exercise. In the classes designed specifically for people with MS, I have also seen great camaraderie develop among the students.

Eric Small, a long time yoga practitioner and teacher who has had MS for decades has seen even more concrete benefits of doing yoga. He claims yoga, besides strengthening

muscles and improving balance, can reduce constipation, improve breathing, and improve bladder control.

How to find a yoga instructor near you?

- Check local hospitals for classes.
- Consult a physical therapist.
- Check the web.
- If there are no special classes for people with MS, and you use a cane or walker, try a class for senior citizens.
- If no classes seem right, try a video. Get a friend to commit to doing yoga with you.
- Look in your public library for the book *Recovery Yoga*. There are many yoga books that claim to be “gentle,” but this book truly is a gem. Also, the author has MS.

Resources to consult:

Web sites:

Anusara yoga www.anusara.com

Integrative yoga therapy www.iytyogatherapy.com

Iyengar yoga www.iyngaus.org

Kripalu yoga www.kripalu.org

Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy www.pryt.com

Svaroopaa www.masteryoga.org

Viniyoga www.viniyoga.com

Books:

Dworkis, Sam. *Recovery Yoga*. New York, Three Rivers Press, 1997.

Videos:

Crotzer, Shoosh. *Pathways: Exercise video for people with limited mobility*.

Journal articles:

Crotzer, Shoosh. Welcome to the yoga jungle. *Inside MS*, winter 2001, 19(1).
Article available online at www.nationalmssociety.org

Despres, Loraine. Yoga and MS. *Yoga Journal*, Jul/Aug 1997, pp.94-103.
_____. Yoga & MS: Regaining a sense of control. *New Mobility*, Jul 1998, pp.28-32. (Loraine’s articles are about Eric Small and his students with MS.)

Doherty, Susan. Iyengar Yoga and multiple sclerosis. *Yoga Rahasya*, 2002, 9:3,27-32.

Franklin, Ada-Reva. The Life experiences of people with multiple sclerosis who practice yoga. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 2002, no.12, pp.63-69.

Gatti de Greco, Patricia. Yoga for multiple sclerosis: An interview with Martha Patt. *Yoga World*, Jan-Mar 2000, pp.8-9.

Nolan, Roger. Yoga therapy and multiple sclerosis. Originally printed in the newsletter of Integrative Yoga Therapy. Article available online at www.iytyogatherapy.com

OHSU researchers reveal yoga and exercise can improve multiple sclerosis patients' quality of life. OHSU (Oregon Health & Science University) news release, 2 Apr 2003. (Research led by Barry Oken.)

This curriculum was researched and written by Cindy Irvine, who teaches yoga for people with MS in the Portland area. To find out more about yoga classes for people with MS in Portland, you can contact her students: Debra Arivee debraa@sdra.com or Susan Dobroff at (503) 230-2074.

Curriculum commissioned by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Oregon Chapter. April, 2005.

Training Outline

For a one-hour presentation, I suggest:

Introduce yourself and the goal of the session **(5 min.)**

Assess the knowledge level and concerns of people in attendance **(5 min)**

Go over the information in this curriculum, but don't hand it out till the end of the session. **(30 min.)**

Do a few seated poses

breath work; neck and shoulder stretches; a twist and forward bend. If straps are available, can do a chest opener in the chair.

And/or

Demonstrate a few poses with modifications

standing poses done in the chair or on the floor **(15 min.)**

Give time for people to ask questions **(5 min.)**