Cancer Health 25: Smitha Mallaiah, MSc, C-IAYT

Integrating yoga into evidence-based cancer care

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The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

Smitha Mallaiah, MSc, C-IAYT, 35, has helped people affected by cancer make yoga a part of their care for over 18 years. A senior mind-body intervention specialist in the Department of Palliative, Rehabilitative and Integrative Medicine at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Mallaiah specializes in integrating evidence-informed yoga therapy into conventional cancer care.

Working alongside other integrative medicine clinicians, Mallaiah provides yoga therapy to inpatients and outpatients from diagnosis to treatment and through the end of life. She offers one-on-one instruction and group classes and also works with couples and patient-caregiver teams undergoing the cancer journey together.

Mallaiah challenges the idea that yoga is only for fit people, noting that programs can be tailored to accommodate an individual's specific needs, health status and ability level. "If you can breathe,

you can do yoga," she told Cancer Health. For example, stretching and strengthening exercises can help manage lymphedema (fluid buildup) after women with breast cancer undergo surgery, while people with head and neck cancer can benefit from starting yoga therapy prior to surgery and radiation.

In addition to its physical benefits, yoga and meditation also help the mind and spirit. "Yoga is not just a physical exercise—it is a mind-body discipline and a way of life," Mallaiah says. "Yoga calms the nervous system, helping with anxiety, depression and sleep." Mindfulness, she adds, means being in the present moment without judgment. "Mind-body practices, such as yoga, give people the opportunity to be more accepting of their situation and face it and feel more in control," she told Messenger, MD Anderson's employee publication.

On the research side, Mallaiah develops and evaluates yoga interventions designed for people with different types of cancer. Recent research suggests that yoga and other mind-body practices can help improve sleep, reduce side effects such as fatigue and brain fog, manage stress and improve overall physical well-being and quality of life. One recent study, for example, found that yoga therapy for men with prostate cancer led to improvements in inflammation and immune function and better quality of life. Says Mallaiah, "If we can enhance quality of life for anybody, even for a single moment, that makes us feel worthwhile."

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