

How Lung Cancer Patients and Caregivers Can Benefit from Yoga

Yoga can be effective as a supportive therapy for people with lung cancer as well as their caregivers.

December 22, 2020 By Sharon Holly

Lung cancer is the second most common cancer and leading cause of death in both men and women globally and in the United States. Although smoking cigarettes is most often the cause of lung cancer, it is important to understand how environmental factors such as exposure to chemicals and genetic changes can also be contributing factors. This is why making healthy lifestyle choices and following [AICR's Cancer Prevention Recommendations](#) is so important.

A [pilot study of Yoga for Breathing and Quality of Life of Lung Cancer Patients](#) led by Judith Marie Fouladbakhsh of Oakland University reported that although the 5-year survival rate has slowly increased for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients, quality of life (QOL) is severely compromised due to physical and psychological symptoms such as cancer treatments, anxiety due to respiratory compromise, increased stress and impaired sleep. Positive outcomes from the study included: enhanced mood, better sleep quality and significant improvement in breathing. These outcomes improved the quality of life for lung cancer patients and reinforce the need for continuing such studies.

Benefits of Yoga for Lung Cancer Patients and Caregivers

Kathrin Milbury at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, [led a study in 2017](#) for advanced lung cancer patients along with their caregivers and the findings showed that yoga can be effective as a supportive therapy.

An article in [Oncology Times](#) highlighted the study findings presented at the 2017 Palliative and Supportive Care in Oncology Symposium. Milbury spoke about Thoracic radiation therapy being commonly used with “respiratory toxicities,” which may lead to decreased physical function and affect QOL. Milbury mentioned that “yoga therapy may buffer against disease and treatment-related sequelae,” and how earlier studies have shown that people can exercise while being treated with chemotherapy or radiation. “Caregivers sometimes have more anxiety and sleeping problems than patients,” explained Milbury. “Therefore, we thought that having the patient and caregiver go through yoga instruction together would be beneficial for both partners.”

Why Choose Yoga as an Intervention?

Yoga is a gentle, low-impact form of exercise that is readily adaptable to patients' needs, easily allows caregivers to join in and has a strong emphasis on breathing. This is important since shortness of breath is often a physical symptom for people with lung cancer. The researchers in this study chose poses that focus on breath and stretching the chest area, often called "chest openers."

The study showed significant improvement in physical function, mental health and overall QOL. Milbury reported that "yoga therapy appears to be a feasible and beneficial supportive care strategy for lung cancer patients and caregivers." The patients in the study enjoyed yoga as a break from their cancer experience and both patients and caregivers expressed their enjoyment of learning something new together. Many planned to continue yoga on their own.

Breathing Techniques and How to Begin

A breathing technique that is often instructed in yoga classes is called ujjayi, which instructs the student to breathe in and out of the nose. This is a very gentle breath that should not require much effort. Diaphragmatic breathing may also be taught, which emphasizes expansion in the chest and abdomen on the inhale and conscious contraction in the abdomen on the exhale. This simple technique combined with the integration of breath and movement can bring a "greater depth to the quality" of a yoga practice.¹

Here you will find a short yoga routine that demonstrates ujjayi and diaphragmatic breathing techniques combined with chest openers:

For more guidance, contact your local cancer center or hospital. Many of these places offer yoga classes for both patients and caregivers that are currently available online. The Cancer Support Community is well-known for making their programs available for all affected by cancer and they currently have 175 locations worldwide including 52 license affiliates and health care partnerships. [Click here](#) to find a location near you.

[This article](#) was originally released on December 17, 2020, by the American Institute for Cancer Research. It is republished with permission.