Yoga for Cancer

Yoga can benefit those living with breast cancer, head and neck cancer, cervical cancer and uterine cancer.

September 14, 2020 By Bob Barnett

In your mind's eye, when you imagine yoga, do you see a fit person perfecting a difficult pose? That can be a problem. "When people are going through a life-threatening illness like cancer, they ask, 'Why would I do anything like yoga now?'" says Smitha Mallaiah, MS, a yoga therapist at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. She often responds, "If you can breathe, you can do yoga." Depending on the cancer and the individual, she employs different clinical protocols:

- Breast cancer. After surgery and radiation, many women experience painful and limiting lymphedema—swelling from the removal of lymph nodes. "We do stretching and strengthening exercises that keep the lymph moving, combined with deep breathing," explains Mallaiah. "We avoid practices such as a plank or downward dog that put pressure on lymph nodes." Yoga for women with breast cancer reduces pain while improving range of motion, physical functioning and a sense of wellness.

- Head and neck cancer. Treatment, including surgery and radiation, can lead to rapid weight loss and severe difficulties in swallowing, which can lead to tube feeding and further decline. Studies found that yoga therapy after treatment didn't work well, but a prehab program, including exercises for the head and neck and to aid swallowing, "was like day and night—60% to 70% improved," she says. Compared to controls, those doing yoga pretreatment were less likely to get a feeding tube and more able to maintain weight.

- Uterine and cervical cancers can lead to fatigue, bleeding, pelvic scarring, vaginal dryness, long-term pain and urinary and fecal incontinence. Yoga can help before and after treatment. "Certain poses benefit the pelvic floor area, and breathing practices help with pain and fatigue.

It can be extremely beneficial.”

Yoga also benefits the mind and spirit. “When someone is going through a life-threatening illness, most of their world is fear,” Mallaiah says. “Yoga calms the nervous system, helping with anxiety, depression and sleep.” Learning a specific practice for when you feel tired, for example, can help you feel empowered.

Mallaiah works with caregivers too. “Patients often feel dependent on caregivers, so when they do a yoga pose, I get them to support each other equally and become present to each other’s breath. They often tell me, ‘This is the only time we have been able to open up to each other in such a positive atmosphere.’”

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