

Yoga Therapist

Columbia University Irving Medical Center mind-body specialist Leigh Leibel, MSc, coedited *Yoga Therapy Across the Cancer Care Continuum*.

June 13, 2022 By Abby Sajid

What are the benefits of practicing yoga during cancer care?

Yoga unites mind, body and spirit, and that's why it is so beneficial for people who have a cancer diagnosis: It addresses the whole person. Studies of people with cancer have found that it improves overall health, quality of life and physical functioning and reduces psychosocial distress, musculoskeletal symptoms, nausea, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, fatigue and cognitive issues associated with treatment. National guidelines recommend yoga during and after cancer treatment.

At what stage is it beneficial?

Yoga has applications at each stage of care, including diagnosis, treatment, posttreatment and survivorship, chronic cancer, recurrence or metastasis and end of life. There's also a new area called pre-habilitation in which yoga has great utility. It's the period after diagnosis when we are helping our patients prepare physically and emotionally for their treatment.

How does yoga help people with physical issues?

The physical practice helps with functional movement, helping people with cancer gently get activity into the day, especially during chemotherapy and radiation, when you might be experiencing fatigue. Studies show that a physical yoga practice can help with osteoporosis induced by treatment. It's a gentle, mild way to help prevent sarcopenia [muscle loss], which is common in cancer patients. A yoga program can help prevent and manage lymphedema [painful buildup of lymph fluid after the removal of lymph nodes] because it keeps the lymph flowing. Plus, yoga can help with joint pain (which can occur, for example, in women taking aromatase inhibitors for hormone-positive breast cancer) by moving the joints and through breathing and meditation to help reframe pain.

Can anyone do yoga?

Yes. You don't have to stand on a mat and lean over to touch your toes. If you are in the chemotherapy infusion suite, you can do yoga. Many of my patients do yoga in bed. It could be stretching or tightening and releasing a muscle. Breath is a big part of yoga, whether you're lying in a bed, sitting in a chair or are in a yoga class. Even people who are at the end of life can do

some kind of yoga.

Any tips on finding a yoga therapist who works in cancer?

Yoga therapists are generally available at hospitals, academic medical centers and cancer centers. It's a graduate-level profession that requires a master's or doctoral degree. These kinds of practitioners are highly trained in the clinical application of yoga in oncology populations. However, people who have moved into survivorship could work with a yoga teacher who has a different level of training. You can go to the International Association of Yoga Therapists and search their database of certified therapists.

What inspires you?

I come to this work as a cancer survivor myself and as a clinician working with people with cancer. What inspires me is sharing these yoga practices and techniques to help improve the lives of 34 million cancer survivors worldwide.

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