

Yoga for MS



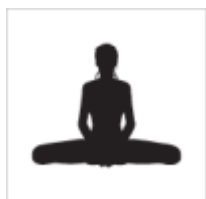
On the mat, in a chair, or even in bed, yoga can create strength, flexibility and balance—in mind and body.

by Shara Rutberg

The scientific community is becoming more—well, flexible—when it comes to attitudes about yoga and its role in alleviating symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

Until recently, the effects of the practice on MS had never been subjected to rigorous scientific inquiry, and therefore it couldn't be recommended. But a recent pilot study conducted at Rutgers University is changing that with promising preliminary outcomes. And the study's participants seem to be at least as excited about the results as the researchers, if not more so.

Some popular types of yoga



Hatha

Any yoga style that focuses on the practice's physical postures. Often a less-intense workout.



Ashtanga

A physically demanding series of postures performed sequentially, linked with the breath.



Iyengar

A slower, meticulous style of yoga with an emphasis on proper pose alignment.



Bikram

Students of this yoga style (sometimes called “hot yoga”) work through a series of 26 poses. This type is not recommended for people with MS whose symptoms are triggered by heat.

“After nine years, I was finally able to feel the sand underneath my feet at the beach near our house on the Jersey shore,” reported one participant in a follow-up survey. Another said she was able to get up from her seat unassisted for the first time in 11 years.

Such comments echo a large volume of anecdotal evidence that’s accumulated over the years that supports yoga as a powerful tool for helping people with MS live safer, healthier and happier lives. “And the scientific research is beginning to catch up,” says Dr. Allen C. Bowling, a neurologist and author of **Optimal Health with Multiple Sclerosis: A Guide to Integrating Lifestyle, Alternative, and Conventional Medicine** (Demos Health, 2014).

Not just a bunch of posers

Susan Gould Fogerite, PhD, director of research for the Institute for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the School of Health Related Professions at Rutgers, gathered 26 experts, including neurologists, psychologists, physical therapists and yoga instructors, as

well as people with MS who practice yoga. Together, they created a progressive series of 90-minute, twice-weekly gentle yoga classes. Fourteen women who had either relapsing-remitting or progressive MS, ages 34-64, completed eight weeks of the classes.

The researchers took baseline and post-study measures of mobility, coordination, fatigue, and mental and emotional status. They found that after the program, the women were better able to walk for short distances and for longer periods of time, had better balance and fine-motor coordination, and were better able to move from sitting to standing. The women also reported that their quality of life improved in key areas, including perceived mental health, concentration, bladder control, walking and vision, with a decrease in pain and fatigue. All of these improvements rose to the level of “statistical significance,” an important benchmark of scientific credibility.

Previously, a 2004 Oregon Health Sciences University study found that six months of yoga significantly helped relieve fatigue, and improved strength and flexibility and other quality of life measurements among 69 people with MS. Other smaller studies in the past 10 years have found improvements in anxiety, depression, bladder function, pain, spasticity, weakness and walking among people with MS who practice yoga.

Dr. Fogerite attributes the benefits seen in research, in part, to the mind-body-spirit aspect of yoga. Yoga’s calming, focused method of breathing and mindfulness, along with its acceptance of the body’s limitations, works in tandem with the strength, balance and flexibility training that come with the actual poses, she says.

Drs. Fogerite and Bowling both say more research is needed to discover the mechanics of how yoga works for people with MS, but Dr. Fogerite suspects that the slow, mindful repetitions of the movements in yoga may help “recruit” brain cells next to the cells damaged by the disease—in essence rerouting the network needed to connect for a particular function.

Yoga for every body

For people with MS who practice yoga, the research validates what they already suspected. Eric Small, a Los Angeles-based senior certified Iyengar yoga instructor, says his practice completely transformed his life.

“Had I gone along with my diagnosis and the recommendation to go home, do nothing and stay out of the sun, I would have been long gone,” says Small, who was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 1953 when he was 20 years old and there were no available medical treatments for the disease. “But here I am at 81, stronger and more able than I was before my diagnosis.”



Mary Ann Braubach and her instructor Eric Small, who both have multiple sclerosis, have experienced physical and mental benefits from Iyengar yoga. Photos by Hannah Zackson



Small, who is co-author with Dr. Loren Fishman of **Yoga and Multiple Sclerosis: A Journey to Health and Healing** (Demos Medical Publishing, 2007), notes that people don't have to be especially flexible or strong to do yoga. "Even for a student in a wheelchair, there is a way to do Iyengar yoga," he says. Adapted yoga poses can also be performed while lying down in bed. "For people to understand that there is something they can do to improve their state, that's really the most important part. People gain a sense of freedom, independence and confidence knowing that they have tools that can help manage symptoms."

Mary Ann Braubach, 56, diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2003, began adaptive Iyengar yoga after a particularly bad relapse, working from her wheelchair with Small. "It's extraordinary how much yoga has helped me. It's really strengthened my body," says

Braubach, a resident of Brentwood, California. She adds that her practice also has improved her balance and spasticity, ultimately enabling her to forgo her wheelchair and use a cane for mobility. Yoga has also helped her manage stress, she says. “They call some of the poses ‘restorative,’ and they really do restore your body,” she says.

Going with the flow

As you begin practicing, pay attention to your body, and be very careful as to how much you push yourself, warns Dr. Bowling. “For people with muscle stiffness and spasticity, it’s important to be very cautious about how much to stretch their muscles,” he says. “Err on the side of underperforming, just until you see how your body handles it.” As with all physical practices, be sure to talk to your healthcare provider first.

How long and how often you need to practice yoga before you begin to feel benefits depends on you, says Small, who underscores that yoga is not a “quick fix,” and consistency is key.

You can take elements—like a few minutes of yoga-style breathing—and do them throughout the day as needed: at home, in your office or even barefoot on the beach.

Shara Rutberg is a freelance writer in Boulder, Colorado.

Visit nationalMSSociety.org/yoga or call an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867 to learn more about yoga for people with MS, and to find a qualified instructor with experience with adaptive yoga near you.