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For Breast Cancer Survivors, Life is Better With Yoga

 Oct 6, 2014



Research has long shown that yoga (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/complementary-and-alternative-medicine/more-cam-info.html>) can control physical functions such as blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, metabolism, body temperature, brain waves, and skin resistance. This can result in improved physical fitness, lower levels of stress, and increased feelings of relaxation and well-being.

For women with breast cancer, research shows those who practice yoga may also have less stress (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/emotional-side-effects/distress.html>) and fatigue (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fatigue.html>), and better

quality of life.

In one study, researchers from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center randomly assigned 163 women with breast cancer who were undergoing radiation therapy (</cancer/breast-cancer/treatment/radiation-for-breast-cancer.html>) to 1 of 3 groups. One group enrolled in a 1-hour yoga class 3 days a week for 6 weeks during radiation. Another group enrolled in a stretching class during that same time period. The third group did not enroll in classes.

The women in the yoga group reported improved ability to engage in their daily activities, better general health, and less fatigue. Women in the stretching group also reported less fatigue.

In addition, women in the yoga group had lower cortisol levels, measured by a saliva test. Cortisol is a hormone released by the body in response to stress. According to the study's authors, the results show that yoga can help women control their stress throughout the day. This may be important, they say, because some research suggests high cortisol levels may be linked to poorer survival in women with breast cancer.

In a second study, researchers from The Ohio State University found benefits to practicing yoga for survivors. A group of 200 breast cancer survivors who had finished treatment within the last 3 years was randomly assigned to either 12 weeks of yoga classes twice a week, or to a waiting list for classes. Three months after completing the classes, fatigue averaged 57% lower in the yoga group compared to the non-yoga group, and inflammation in the body (measured by blood testing) was reduced by up to 20%.

According to the National Institutes of Health, there is also some evidence to suggest yoga may be helpful when used with conventional medical treatment to help relieve some of the symptoms linked to cancer, asthma, diabetes, drug addiction, high blood pressure, heart disease, and migraine headaches.

Before you try yoga

Talk to your doctor before starting any new exercise or new therapy to make sure it's safe for you.

Use yoga alongside, not instead of, conventional medical treatment. Yoga cannot cure cancer and should not be used by itself to treat cancer or delay treatment.

Check out the yoga classes in your area, and ask questions about the teachers' training and experience. Many hospitals offer classes and are a good place to start, or ask your doctor for a recommendation.

Get information about different types of yoga. Some yoga postures are hard to achieve, and damage can occur from overstretching joints and ligaments.

Mind, Body, and Spirit

Many cancer patients and survivors use ancient mind-body practices and other complementary therapies (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/complementary-and-alternative-medicine/more-cam-info.html>) to help manage the emotional and psychological side effects that often result from cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Like yoga, tai chi and qi gong have origins in the East and involve slow physical movement, mental focus, and deep breathing. Some studies have suggested that tai chi can help people reduce stress and qi gong can help people manage chronic pain (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/pain.html>). And studies consistently show that regular exercise can help breast cancer survivors (http://img.delivery.net/cm50content/19439/65697/LP/2-0/Section2.html?utm_campaign=breastcancerupdate&utm_medium=email&utm_source=fullserve-20140806-corpcenter-breastcancerupdate-breastcancerupdate&utm_content=acxiom) lessen depression (</treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/emotional-side-effects/anxiety-fear-depression.html>) and fatigue, as well as joint pain from hormone therapy (</cancer/breast-cancer/treatment/hormone-therapy-for-breast-cancer.html>). Regular exercise has also been shown to improve survival and reduce risk of the cancer coming back (</treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/understanding-recurrence.html>).

The American Cancer Society recommends cancer survivors get at least 150 minutes of exercise each week, which should include strength training at least 2 days a week.

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