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Studies show yoga can treat illnesses

BY SARAH AVERY • MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS • NOVEMBER 28, 2008

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RALEIGH, N.C. -- The ancient practice of yoga is increasingly finding a new following -- among doctors and medical researchers who are working to prove its benefits for a variety of illnesses.



2007 photo by MARY SCHROEDER/Detroit Free Press

Doctors are studying the benefits of regular yoga practice. Mee Sook Choo, foreground, taught this class at InZen Yoga in Livonia.

YOGA'S BENEFITS

More than 1,000 studies have been conducted to determine whether yoga helps people suffering from diseases. Here are some results.

Depression: Patients diagnosed with depression showed significant reductions in anger, anxiety and neurotic symptoms after yoga classes, according to researchers in California, Russia and Italy.

Cancer: Cancer patients reported an improvement in overall well-being after practicing yoga, researchers in Canada found. In addition, a group of post-menopausal women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer reported to Duke University scientists that they had fewer hot flashes, slept better and felt less tired.

Diabetes: People with metabolic syndrome, often a precursor to diabetes, took 90-minute yoga classes over 10 weeks and reported having higher energy and lower blood pressure compared to others who did not take the classes, California researchers reported.

SOURCES: PubMed; Duke University

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Researchers at University of North Carolina Hospitals are studying yoga's benefits for people with irritable bowel syndrome. Doctors at Duke University recently completed a study showing that yoga provided significant improvements with hot flashes, sleep and energy levels for postmenopausal women with early breast cancer.

And an oncologist in Beaufort County, N.C., sees improvement in his patients who take yoga classes.

"There's been an explosion of data using yoga as a treatment option," said Dr. Shelley Wroth, an obstetrician at Duke Integrative Medicine and a yoga teacher. She said studies have found that yoga helps people suffering from hypertension, anxiety, arthritis, chronic back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, stress, depression, diabetes and epilepsy -- among others.

A recent study at Duke involved breast cancer patients who were experiencing severe hot flashes and other menopause symptoms. Because of their illness, they were prohibited from taking hormone replacement therapy, so yoga was proposed as an alternative. The study found significant improvement among the women who took yoga classes, compared to women who did not.

"There are a lot of reactions to stress that exacerbate the menopausal symptoms," said Laura Porter, coauthor of the Duke study. "Yoga -- the physical poses and the more cognitive aspects of it -- dampens the stress reactivity."

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But even as the science establishes yoga's benefits, less is known about why it's helpful. Porter and others postulate that the practice reduces stress through stretching, breathing and meditation. For people battling illness, stress reduction may pack extra potency.

"A lot of our diseases have some sort of origins in stress, and the stress reaction," said William Frey, who is leading a yoga class in Raleigh, N.C., as part of a UNC-Chapel Hill study among patients with irritable bowel syndrome. "By taking care of stress, you're starting to eliminate some of the diseases that are caused by it."

Frey said he began offering yoga eight years ago through UNC-CH's Program on Integrative Medicine.

"There was some concern we might be bringing spiritual elements into a very clinical setting," Frey said. "But as people have seen its staying power, and see the results and research, there's beginning to be more respectability."

Yoga's legitimacy increased when the National Institutes of Health became interested in it. The agency is funding studies on yoga and its effect on diseases. But some skepticism remains -- in the medical profession and among patients.

Gioia O'Connell, a 54-year-old breast cancer survivor from Apex, N.C., said she wasn't sure that yoga would help her. Her main hesitation was that yoga stemmed from Eastern roots, and she worried it was incompatible with her Christian faith. Still, she signed up for the study at Duke.

"I have to tell you, it was energizing," O'Connell said. After being diagnosed with cancer in 1994 and undergoing a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and rounds of daily drugs, she felt wrung out. "It helped with stiffness, aches and pains. And the breathing really did help my energy level. That's what I deal with, being a cancer survivor, the fatigue."

Dr. John Inzerillo, an oncologist in Washington, N.C., said his patients have felt that benefit time and again. He began teaching yoga about five years ago as part of a busy practice in Goldsboro, N.C.

"We had breast cancer survivors, lymphoma survivors. Over the course of time -- three or four months -- I could see a lot more flexibility," he said, noting that patients also said they felt less stressed.

About three years ago, Inzerillo scaled back. He quit the Goldsboro practice, set up shop in Washington and wrote a book, "Passion Beyond Pain," about the importance of striking a thoughtful balance in life to overcome pain.

"I made life changes to allow me to get more enjoyment out of life and be more effective at work," he said. "People get disconnected from the things that really mean something in life."

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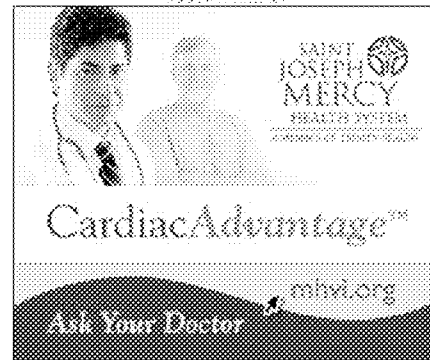
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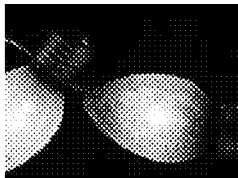
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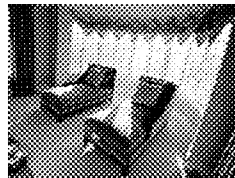


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