

What is Yoga? What is Yoga Therapy?

What is Yoga?¹

Yoga is an ancient mind-body science that has been practiced in India for thousands of years. Historically, it was a contemplative practice aimed at self-transformation, but over the centuries, yoga practitioners recognized its remarkable potential to improve their physical and mental well-being. Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and today's global yoga is widely known as a practice that reduces stress, promotes resilience, improves psychophysiological functioning, and prevents and manages lifestyle diseases.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit verb root yuj—“to yoke or connect.” In this context, it refers to the union of mind, body, and spirit, a connection facilitated by a consistent yoga practice. In the West, yoga often denotes a modern form of Haṭha yoga, a posture-based physical fitness, relaxation, and stress-relief practice. But in truth, there are many different styles and lineages of yoga and many disciplines within the practice. What most styles have in common, however, is their integrative approach that applies multiple yogic techniques simultaneously (or sequentially): breath regulation, mindfulness, meditative techniques, deep relaxation, and physical movement sequences that focus on stretching, strength, balance, and flexibility.

What is Yoga Therapy?

“Yoga Therapy rests under the broader umbrella of Yoga; it is neither separate from nor greater than Yoga” (Yoga Therapy Today, 2019, p. 44).

Although all yoga is potentially therapeutic and healing, yoga therapy is the specific application of yogic tools—postures/exercises, breathwork, meditation techniques, and more—to address an individual's physical, mental, and emotional needs. The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT)—the organization that credentials yoga therapists—defines yoga therapy as “the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the teachings and practice of yoga” (International Association of Yoga

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Therapists, 2023). IAYT-certified yoga therapists (C-IAYTs) have in-depth training to assess their patients/clients and develop a personalized care plan to address patient/client-specific goals, medical conditions, and physical limitations. Yoga therapists assess patients/clients through the yogic pancha kosha (Sanskrit: five sheaths) model, a lens that views the human system in five intertwined layers, i.e., physical, mental, emotional, energetic, and spiritual. The kosha system aligns with the biopsychosocial-spiritual approach to wellness.

Yoga vs. Yoga Therapy

While all yoga is therapeutic, two types of yoga professionals work in oncology: registered yoga teachers (who teach “one-size-fits-all” group yoga classes) and certified yoga therapists (who offer one-on-one or small group customized sessions, often in a hospital or clinical setting). The main difference between the two is their level of training and scope of practice. There is a role for both in cancer care, depending on their level of yoga training, oncology education, and experience working with patients/survivors with unique medical needs. For example, a yoga teacher could teach a community class for cancer survivors who do not have risk factors. In contrast, a certified yoga therapist with extensive oncology and yoga training could work one-on-one with people undergoing active cancer treatment.

- **Yoga teachers.** Yoga teachers typically complete a 200 or 500-hour generalized yoga training program offered by a yoga school registered with the Yoga Alliance (YA), the largest nonprofit association representing the yoga community (Yoga Alliance, 2023). After training, teachers can register with YA as an RYT-200 or RYT-500 yoga teacher. Yoga teachers generally teach “one size fits all” group classes in yoga studios and gyms, where the teacher chooses the class theme, and students/clients rely on the teacher’s instruction for engagement. The teacher’s knowledge of yoga may be limited and generalized, and they may not be trained to work with medical populations.
- **Yoga therapists.** Yoga therapists typically graduate from yoga therapy programs accredited by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), a nonprofit that promotes research and education in yoga and serves as a professional organization for yoga teachers and yoga therapists worldwide. IAYT-certified yoga therapy programs include a minimum of 800-1000 hours of didactic and clinical training (International Association of Yoga Therapists, 2023). After taking a board exam, yoga therapists can apply for certification by IAYT. Many yoga therapists are licensed physicians, nurses, psychologists, physical therapists/occupational therapists, or social workers, and now several universities offer a master’s or doctorate degree in yoga therapy. Yoga therapists have in-depth training to help them assess patients/clients, develop customized therapeutic yoga sessions, and ensure a safe practice. They work with patients/clients

one-on-one or in small groups, but all patients are assessed. Certified yoga therapists are bound by the IAYT professional code of ethics and scope of practice that allow them to work within their training experience and the boundaries set by the professional body. Yoga therapists work alongside medical professionals to support clients through assessment and plan of care, but they do not offer diagnostic advice or advice about cancer treatments.

Yoga and Yoga Therapy for Supportive Cancer Care²

Many people with cancer and cancer survivors turn to integrative therapies, such as yoga and meditation, to help reduce stress and manage the side effects of their cancer treatment. Many hospitals offer yoga therapy to their patients during and after cancer treatment. Well-designed research shows that practicing yoga during and after treatment can improve a person's quality of life by helping them get a better night's sleep (Lin et al., 2019; Mustian et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2004), reduce stress and distress (Banerjee et al., 2007; Pruthi et al., 2012; Carlson et al., 2014), manage anxiety (Rao et al., 2009; Raghavendra et al., 2007; Dhruva et al., 2012; Taso et al., 2014), and fatigue (Bower et al., 2011; Chandwani et al., 2010; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2014; Armer & Lutgendorf, 2019; Raghavendra et al., 2009), and boost energy and mood (Armer & Lutgendorf, 2019; Cramer et al., 2013) among many other benefits. Several United States and European guidelines for supportive cancer care recommend yoga during and after cancer treatment:

- The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) recommends yoga for managing fatigue, nausea, and vomiting and suggests considering yoga for distress pain, cognitive function, and menopausal symptoms in cancer patients (Ettinger et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2022).
- The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the Society for Integrative Oncology (SIO) recommend yoga for general cancer pain, musculoskeletal pain, and arthralgia pain due to aromatase inhibitors (Mao et al., 2023), and yoga to people with breast cancer for depression, stress reduction, anxiety, and to improve quality of life (Greenlee et al., 2017).
- The European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) recommends yoga for cancer-related fatigue (Fabi et al., 2020).

Clinical practice guidelines in cancer are essential because they help oncologists and patients make educated decisions about the safe, effective use of integrative therapies to support and

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enhance wellness, improve quality of life, and relieve cancer symptoms and its treatment. Yoga is also beneficial for caregivers. A yoga practice can support their health and well-being, providing valuable tools to manage stress, improve physical fitness, and enhance their overall quality of life while actively caring for their loved ones. Given this, yoga is an essential evidence-based therapy that should be offered to everyone during standard cancer treatment and beyond.

How does yoga work?

Yoga is a multicomponent practice, and the various yogic techniques work synergistically. Recent randomized controlled trials (gold standard research) show that yoga and meditation positively impact gene expression and reduce chronic inflammation and harmful stress hormones such as cortisol and norepinephrine (Leibel & Pitman, 2022, pp. 71-73). The physiological changes invoked by yoga work against the environmental forces that trigger chronic stress, known to damage DNA and promote cancer formation.

How can yoga therapy help people affected by cancer throughout their care?

Yoga therapy takes a holistic “mind-body-spirit” approach to address cancer-related side effects, benefiting patients at every stage of the cancer care continuum. In addition to the cancer-related symptoms described above, yoga therapy fosters resilience, empowerment, and self-care, nurturing a positive body image and integrating the mind, body, and spirit. With personalized approaches, it suits individuals at various stages of diagnosis, treatment, recovery, and survivorship. Integrated into comprehensive cancer care, it complements medical treatments, enhances overall well-being, and improves the quality of life for those affected by cancer and their loved ones. Certified yoga therapists can customize the yoga practice for people experiencing lymphedema, pain, fatigue, neuropathy, osteoporosis, bone metastases, limited range of motion, and other conditions.

What to expect from yoga therapy

You can expect a personalized approach tailored to your needs and goals during a yoga therapy session. A yoga therapist will conduct an initial assessment to understand your medical history, current condition, and goals and preferences. Next, they will work with you to design a customized yoga practice that suits your abilities, physical limitations, and challenges. Your yoga therapy treatment plan may include various yoga practices, including gentle movement, breathing exercises, meditation, relaxation techniques, and lifestyle modifications. These

practices aim to address specific concerns or symptoms you may be experiencing due to cancer or its treatment. Your yoga therapist will provide clear instructions and demonstrations, ensuring you perform the yoga postures and movements safely and comfortably. They may also incorporate modifications or props to accommodate any physical limitations. Most importantly, a yoga therapist will offer compassionate support throughout your sessions, encouraging you to listen to your body, practice self-care and compassion, cultivate mindfulness, and integrate relaxation practices into your daily life. The frequency and duration of your sessions may vary depending on your needs and preferences. You may practice yoga in person or virtually.

How can I be sure the yoga or yoga therapy professional working with me is suitably qualified?

A cancer diagnosis and treatment can carry various side effects that may require each yoga session to be modified to a patient/client's unique needs, so finding a qualified yoga professional is essential. Advanced practice yoga teachers and certified yoga therapists working in cancer care should have completed not only the required hours to become registered yoga teachers or certified yoga therapists but also additional coursework in oncology and oncology yoga. You can find certified yoga therapists through the [International Association of Yoga Therapists database](#) and registered yoga teachers through the [Yoga Alliance website](#). When searching for a yoga professional, read their bios and summaries to see if they have training and experience with yoga and cancer. And be sure to talk to them before beginning a session and ask more about their yoga and cancer-specific training.

Limitations on scope of practice and potential side effects

Yoga has a good safety profile, but people in active cancer treatment (or who are finished with treatment but have lingering side effects) may have physical limitations imposed by surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormone therapy, and comorbid conditions. Therefore, it is essential to work with yoga professionals who have specialty training in oncology and experience working with people with cancer. Before beginning a yoga practice, you should always get medical clearance to engage in physical activity. Be sure to tell your yoga therapist and yoga teacher about your cancer and your treatment (or the treatment you've already had). Avoid any yoga practices that cause discomfort and pain.

How to access yoga or yoga therapy for cancer support

Many hospitals offer yoga and yoga therapy for people with cancer. Ask your healthcare provider for information or a referral to a qualified yoga professional. You can also find certified

yoga therapists worldwide through the [International Association of Yoga Therapists database](#). You can find registered yoga teachers worldwide through the [Yoga Alliance website](#). When searching for a yoga professional, read their bios and summaries to see if they have training and experience with yoga and cancer. And be sure to talk to them before beginning a session and ask more about their yoga and cancer-specific training.

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