

Yoga is Medicine: The Role of Yoga Therapy in Integrative Oncology

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What is Integrative Oncology?

When the best of modern medicine is combined with the best of natural, complementary or traditional medicine, it's termed 'integrative medicine'. Cancer is a large group of diseases, and the field devoted to helping people affected by cancer is oncology. Hence integrative oncology combines complementary therapies which have been proven helpful, with the latest conventional treatments. A combination of the two evidence based fields can support people throughout the journey of cancer, to look after their well-being on every level.

The field of integrative oncology is rapidly expanding and with it, numerous opportunities are arising for skilled yoga therapists to engage in the mainstream medical model. The care of people affected by cancer is necessarily holistic. While oncologists are best placed to treat tumours, a whole person approach is generally required in order to address the vast bio-psycho-social and spiritual needs of cancer patients during and after treatment.

Yoga is widely accepted and available in most integrative cancer centres around the world. Along with other proven complementary therapies including touch based therapies such as massage and reflexology, reiki, counselling, art therapy and meditation, yoga may be delivered individually or in small groups.

Can Yoga Cure Cancer?

As an evidence-based, gentle, exercise and meditation intervention with an excellent safety record there is very little resistance to yoga in the field of oncology. When objections do arise, it is mainly due to sensitivity to the vulnerability of the cancer affected population. Any complementary medicine modality which makes claims of 'cure' or suggests drawing people away from orthodox treatments is quickly rejected by mainstream medicine (Pirri, et al., 2008). Individual yoga teachers can hold strong opinions, not all of which are based on current scientific evidence. The world of natural medicine including yoga is rife with unsubstantiated claims and even conspiracy theories which would certainly raise eyebrows and may result in a closing of the door to mainstream cancer care facilities.

Due to these potential issues, the heterogenous nature of yoga lineages, and the short duration of many teacher training programs, it is prudent for integrative oncology organisations to set relevant standards. Some sensible regulation and quality control also supports research so that the evidence base can continue to grow. Providers of yoga for integrative cancer care must be adequately trained and appropriately sensitive to the proven benefits and pragmatic limitations of yoga therapy. It is into this climate that yoga therapy and yoga therapists can find their niche.

What can yoga do for cancer patients, carers and survivors?

Yoga therapy is developing into a respected allied health profession, thanks to dedicated volunteers and advisors in professional bodies such as AAYT and IAYT. The growth of the field depends on high

quality research. Overall the standard of research is high and yoga therapy appears to have numerous benefits, largely psychological but also some physiological benefits for cancer patients and post-treatment survivors who undertake suitable programs.

Areas of clear benefit include decreased fear of recurrence (Lengacher, et al., 2009; Lengacher, et al., 2012), anxiety (Lengacher, et al., 2009; Chandwani, et al., 2010; Bannerjee B & al, 2007; Carson, et al., 2007; Carson, et al., 2009) and insomnia (Carson, et al., 2009; Vadiraja, et al., 2009; Mustian, et al., 2009; Mustian, et al., 2013). The theoretical mechanism for yoga's benefit for reducing fear of recurrence, anxiety and insomnia probably relates to increased mindfulness and also the shift from sympathetic nervous system dominance to parasympathetic nervous system dominance that yoga is known to create.

MBSR has been utilized in mainstream health settings since the late 1970's and involves a secular form of insight meditation with very gentle yoga movements (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). As there is so much research using MBSR (mindfulness based stress reduction) in cancer and other chronic diseases, it would appear that the meditative aspects of yoga have just as much if not more benefit than the physical asanas, or at least that the intensity of yoga is not necessarily the key.

While cancer and its' treatment do not always cause pain, there is a growing body of research using mindfulness and yoga based interventions for all manner of pain. For people experiencing chronic pain, yoga therapy presents a non-pharmacological approach to effective pain management. Pain may be associated with aromatase inhibitor use, post-surgery or general cancer-related pain. Studies support the use of yoga for all kinds of pain syndromes (Galantino, et al., 2012; Schutze, et al., 2010; Speed-Andrews, et al., 2010).

A common side effect of cancer treatment is cognitive impairment, sometimes called 'chemo-brain'. Yoga is showing significant results in studies which measure this aspect of mental function (Galantino, et al., 2012). Newer research in a general population of older adults also showed benefits to executive function from an 8 week yoga intervention (Gothe, 2014).

Lymphoedema is another debilitating side effect which tends to follow removal of lymph nodes to prevent metastases (spread of cancer cells). Gentle yoga has shown the ability to manage breast cancer related lymphoedema and also increases upper body range of motion (Loudon, et al., 2012; Loudon, et al., 2014).

Digestion is generally improved by yoga and for cancer patients this has a large impact on nutrition, treatment tolerance and general well-being. In breast cancer patients experiencing chemo-related nausea, yoga helped decrease nausea and vomiting (Raghavendra & Nagarathna, 2007). The Canadian Yoga Thrive program found great improvements in quality of life and a decrease in cancer related digestive distress (Culos-Reed, et al., 2005).

Overall yoga is proving to be a significantly beneficial integrative therapy for oncology settings. Evidence is growing for the role of yoga therapy in balancing mood disturbance, minimizing the distress of a cancer experience, and improving quality of life.

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