Using Yoga for Chronic Pain Relief

by ANGELA FINLAY

The Best Yoga Practice, Postures and Perspective to Ease Your Pain

When you live with chronic pain, you begin to forget what your body felt like before. Your brain, muscles and joints have “learned” how to live with a constant pain response, and that’s difficult to interrupt. The challenge is to teach your body to release, repair and function without the constant stress chronic pain causes.

Conventional medicine can help with the painful sensation, but experts agree it’s worth looking into other ways to sever the loop of pain signals that leave you exhausted, immobile and depressed. In recent years, more attention has fallen on yoga, a practice that has proven enormously successful for pain relief.

While yoga for chronic pain relief isn’t necessarily an overnight cure, it is more powerful than it appears to be. Recent evidence suggests it may be one of the best ways to counteract the damage caused by chronic pain, and pave the way for a much healthier, more comfortable future.

The Research Behind Yoga for Chronic Pain Relief

A very recent study researched war veterans with chronic pain and yoga. The vets, most with chronic back pain, were asked to perform twice-weekly yoga sessions, for a six-month window. The results were astounding – in the vets who were participating, “the number of patients in the study on opiate-based pain pills dropped from 20 percent to 8 percent.”

Lead researcher Erik Groessl hopes that the findings of his study will allow vets to participate in yoga in conjunction with the VA.

In addition, yoga was researched as a therapy for low back pain compared to physical therapy. Physical therapy has long been the gold standard for low back pain treatment. I am not here to dissuade the fact that physical therapy is excellent – in fact, I have utilized physical therapy myself numerous times, with excellent results. However, for people who have the time or financial constraints, physical therapy is not always the answer.

Enter yoga.

Robert Saper, MD, MPH, of the Department of Family Medicine at Boston Medical Center, studied yoga as a treatment for low back pain in low-income, minority patients. Dr. Saper pointed out that low back pain affects a disproportionate amount of people who are economically disadvantaged, and he stated, “Therefore, we feel that it was important to test whether the yoga would be received well by an underserved population, as well as being effective.”

The study was published in June in *Annals of Internal Medicine* and studied 320 individuals who were of low-income status and racially diverse. Of the 320 individuals, they were divided into three groups – physical therapy, yoga, or educational handouts, in a 2:2:1 ratio.

The results were astounding – the physical therapy and yoga had a similar reduction in symptoms! Not only that, but after 40 weeks, more people were likely to adhere to a yoga program than a physical therapy program.

In just these two research studies, published this summer, yoga has proved beneficial for chronic pain reduction and as a chronic pain management tool.

How Yoga Helps Your Body

Before you launch into a devoted yoga practice, it helps to understand how the specific elements can work for you. Yoga postures or poses are known as *asanas*, and they are the basis of your routine.

There are hundreds of different postures; some will be good for your particular sort of pain, and some will be off-limits. However, a well-rounded selection of asanas can help in some concrete ways:

- **Muscle release**. Many people can trace their pain to tight, aching muscles. Even minor injuries to ligaments and tendons can trigger muscles to seize up, and without a release, the pain can continue or grow. Yoga can teach you to release the clenched muscles by holding poses and breathing into them.
- **Proper alignment**. For some, chronic pain stems from the long-term effects of poor posture: when you favor certain muscles and allow others to lag, you can wind up compressing tissues and joints. A yoga practice focuses on good form and close awareness, helping you to balance out your muscle groups and correct the alignment of your bones.
- **Better sleep**. Poor sleep and chronic pain go hand in hand. It's well-known that poor sleep can lower your tolerance to pain, and of course, pain can make it extremely difficult to get a good night's sleep. Yoga can break that cycle by helping you match the gentle movements of the body to a calm and controlled mindset.

Breathing is also a big part of yoga, and an important pain-relieving technique. You'll learn how to use your breath in different ways — to energize, relax, refresh, and open your muscles further. Since the speed and quality of your breath influences your thoughts and mood, soon you'll develop a more profound connection between your mind and body. The result? Better control over your brain — including your pain perception and processing.

Next page: The different types of yoga available, yoga exercises for chronic pain relief, and additional tips.

The Types of Yoga

If you're still reading, I must have piqued your attention! So, as promised, here's a short discussion about the types of yoga.

- **Vinyasa:** Undoubtedly one of the most popular types of yoga, this type of class will take you through a sequence of *asanas*, or poses, in a fluid-like manner. Meaning – each pose flows into the next one. You'll focus on your breath in conjunction with your movement. However, each class is probably different – you may see a class as labeled "Slow Flow" or "Power Yoga."
- **Restorative:** This type of class uses props, such as bolsters, blankets, and blocks, to settle you into a pose. Be prepared to be in a pose for several minutes – but with the use of the props, the pose should feel In fact, that's why it's called a *restorative* class – you may leave feeling like you just took a nap!
- **Ashtanga:** This type of practice is similar to a vinyasa class, as it focuses heavily on the breath. However, Ashtanga yoga utilizes the same poses in the same order – and it is a vigorous sequence.
- **Bikram:** Bikram is yoga in a heated yoga studio, teaching the same 26 yoga poses, similar to an Ashtanga practice.
- **Hatha:** Hatha yoga "is a generic term that refers to any type of yoga that teaches physical postures. Nearly every type of yoga class taught in the West is Hatha yoga."
- **Hot yoga:** Most hot yoga classes are similar to Bikram yoga, although a generic hot yoga class does not necessarily need to utilize the same 26 yoga poses. Plus, Bikram yoga is a trademarked type of yoga.

There are various other types of yoga but these will get you started when you're looking at a yoga studio's course offerings list. My advice to you? Start with a beginner class if you haven't done yoga. Speak with the instructors and ask for recommendations – most yoga instructors are certified, and can give you recommendations. Try out as much as you can and I'll bet you'll find the type of yoga that best fits you.

Good Yoga Exercises for Chronic Pain Relief

Relaxation practices are especially helpful for people living with chronic pain. When you truly relax your mind and body, you turn off your stress response and activate your body's repair process instead. The idea is to teach your body how to rest safely, comfortably and without worry, rather than use rest as an escape mechanism.

You can bring on this relaxation response with what is known as restorative poses. These are gentle poses that shouldn't challenge your balance or muscle strength; as you breathe consciously into each posture, you can help specific areas of your body release tension.

Nesting Pose

Lying on your side with your legs bent and knees drawn up towards your belly, place a pillow between your knees and one under your head. This may seem like you're simply resting as you would in bed, but the pose is more therapeutic than you realize. Concentrate on each breath, matching the length of each inhalation to each exhalation.

Supported Bound Angle Pose

This posture will open up your hips, elongate your spine, and relax tension in your chest and belly. Lie on your back, bring the soles of your feet together, and let your knees fall to each side. Place a pillow under each knee for support.

It can help to lie back on a bolster or stack of pillows to raise your chest. With each inhalation, the front of your body will open and relax.

Supported Forward Bend

By sitting cross-legged and leaning forward over a soft support, you can release tension in the hips and back without straining any muscles. A stack of pillow or sofa cushions will work well, and as you move forward you can rest your head in whatever way feels comfortable. If you can sit comfortably in the posture without any stretch in your back, you'll know you have enough support.

Tips for Yoga Beginners

If you're new to yoga, it can be difficult to guide yourself through postures. Take some time to research the poses if you're not sure about them, ideally working with a trained instructor the first few times you practice. Here are a few tips to keep you on track:

- **Use props like yoga blocks, towels, pillows or the wall to support any part of your body that needs it.** This will help you stay comfortable for as long as you choose to hold the pose.
- **Hold each pose for at least a few minutes.** Be patient. Restorative yoga is about granting your body the time and space to really let go; if you're dealing with chronically tight muscles, this can take a while.
- **Don't push for stretching or strengthening sensations.** Yoga certainly has a place in more active exercise regimes, but dynamic or powerful poses will tense your muscles. You're aiming for the opposite effect.

Yoga is very safe, and since there are really no adverse side effects (as long as you're not pushing your body harder than you should be), there's no reason to worry. It's not a competitive sport, and it's important not to expect too much of yourself, either.

The rewards of yoga are greatest when you’re patient, and try your best to nurture that mind-body connection. With some practice, you’ll likely find your mood, energy and mobility lifts as your pain decreases.