

Yoga Eases Chronic Back Pain, Study Shows

BY SARAH C.P. WILLIAMS



People with chronic back pain might benefit from hitting the yoga mat. Three months of weekly yoga classes eased back pain more than the usual course of care — an informative back pain booklet, according to a new study.

Even a year later, patients with [chronic back pain](#) who had participated in yoga classes reported less pain than those who hadn't been assigned the classes. The study, conducted in the United Kingdom, followed 313 adults with nonspecific chronic back pain — in other words, ongoing back pain with no known physical cause.

"Even for patients who still had pain, they showed an improvement in being able to perform their normal daily activities," said study researcher David Torgerson, of the University of York

The new results were published today (Oct. 31, 2011) in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. They complement a U.S.-based study published last week that saw improvement in back pain among patients who participated in either yoga or stretching classes.

Torgerson and his colleagues recruited 313 back pain patients from throughout the U.K. All participants were given booklets on coping with back pain; 156 were also assigned three months of yoga classes.

The assigned yoga classes were run by 20 separate teachers, who all had special training in using yoga to treat back pain. Each weekly class was 75 minutes long, and designed for beginners. Additionally, instructors handed out home practice sheets so that the patients could continue to practice throughout the week.

"These classes were more gentle than a typical yoga class," Torgerson said, "because the yoga teachers didn't want to exacerbate any back pain. They put together a series of yoga poses that would increase, if patients could manage it, the ability to move."

After three months, patients completed written questionnaires about their pain levels and how their back pain influenced their daily activities. More questionnaires were completed six months and 12 months after the start of the study.

At the conclusion of the yoga class, patients who had taken it were able to do 30 percent more activities than those who had received only the booklet. In addition, they reported more of a

[decrease in pain](#). Sixty percent of those from the yoga group said they were still practicing yoga on their own.

"This is an intervention that people can do at home once they've been trained to do it," Torgerson said, citing one of the benefits of yoga over other types of treatment that require office visits for every flare up.

Yoga has been studied as a treatment for back pain because of its combined focus on stretching, strengthening and relaxing. But in a study published Oct. 24 in the Archives of Internal Medicine, researcher Karen Sherman of the Group Health Research Institute in Seattle found that classes focused solely on stretching also provided a benefit.

"The main thing is that people need a number of options," Sherman said. "Because nothing is going to work for everybody, and for these cases of nonspecific back pain, conventional medicine doesn't have much to offer."

Sherman's trial was designed similarly to the new U.K. study, and included 228 adults. They were assigned to either yoga classes, stretching exercises or given an informational booklet. Both stretching and yoga improved patients' back pain.

"When you see two different studies showing similar things, it gives you confidence that the results are robust," Sherman said.

Both studies focused on patients with mild to moderate pain who had no other major health problems, Sherman said. Further studies may explore how [yoga or stretching](#) can ease more severe back pain, or help patients who have other health problems in addition to their back pain.

Still, Sherman cautions patients against racing to the nearest gym to sign up for yoga classes. "The yoga classes we studied weren't just any yoga class," she said. "It's important to find an instructor who is accustomed to teaching beginners and accustomed to using yoga therapeutically."

Pass it on: Regular participation in therapeutic yoga classes can ease mild to moderate chronic back pain.

http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/45110168/ns/today-today_health/t/yoga-eases-chronic-back-pain-study-shows/