

# NCCAM clinical digest

## Spotlight on Modality: Yoga for Health: What the Science Says

August 2012

Current research suggests that a carefully adapted set of [yoga \(/health/yoga\)](#) poses may reduce [low-back pain \(/health/pain/lowback.htm\)](#) and improve function. Other studies also suggest that practicing yoga (as well as other forms of regular exercise) might improve quality of life; reduce stress; lower heart rate and blood pressure; help relieve anxiety, depression, and insomnia; and improve overall physical fitness, strength, and flexibility. But some research suggests yoga may not improve asthma, and studies looking at yoga and arthritis have had mixed results.

### Scientific Evidence

- One [NCCAM-funded study \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19701112\)](#) of 90 people with **chronic low-back pain** found that participants who practiced Iyengar yoga had significantly less disability, pain, and depression after 6 months.
- In a [2011 study \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22025101\)](#), also funded by NCCAM, researchers compared yoga with conventional stretching exercises or a self-care book in 228 adults with chronic low-back pain. The results showed that both yoga and stretching were more effective than a self-care book for improving function and reducing symptoms due to chronic low-back pain.
- Conclusions from another 2011 [study \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22041945\)](#) of 313 adults with chronic or recurring low-back pain suggested that practicing yoga for 12 weeks resulted in better function than usual medical care.

However, studies show that certain health conditions may not benefit from yoga.

- A 2011 [systematic review \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?term=%22The+Journal+of+asthma+%3A+official+journal+of+the+Association+for+the+Care+of+Asthma%22%5BJour%5D+AND+48%5Bvolume%5D+AND+6%5Bissue%5D+AND+632%5Bpage%5D+AND+2011%5Bpd%5D&cmd=detailsearch\)](#) of clinical studies suggests that there is no sound evidence that yoga improves **asthma**.
- A [2011 review of the literature \(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?term=37%5Bvolume%5D+AND+1%5Bissue%5D+AND+2011%5Bpd%5D+AND+Haaz%5Bauthor%5D&cmd=detailsearch\)](#) reports that few published studies have looked at yoga and **arthritis**, and of those that have, results are inconclusive. The two main types of arthritis—osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis—are different conditions, and the effects of yoga may not be the same for each. In addition, the reviewers suggested that even if a study showed that yoga helped osteoarthritic finger joints, it may not help osteoarthritic knee joints.

### Side Effects and Risks

- Yoga is generally low-impact and safe for healthy people **when practiced appropriately under the guidance of a well-trained instructor**.
- Overall, those who practice yoga have a low rate of side effects, and the risk of serious injury from yoga is quite low. However, certain types of stroke as well as pain from nerve damage are among the rare possible side effects of practicing yoga.
- Women who are pregnant and people with certain medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, glaucoma (a condition in which fluid pressure within the eye slowly increases and can damage the eye's optic nerve), and sciatica (pain, weakness,

numbing, or tingling that can extend from the lower back to the calf, foot, or even the toes), should modify or avoid some yoga poses.

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