

Potential benefits of yoga for people living with Parkinson's

Admittedly, most of us won't be modeling poses for a yoga magazine any time soon. The bodies on those glossy pages are not of people with the symptoms of Parkinson's: their bodies move and bend with ease.

Yoga, however, is not limited to individuals who can "do" it. Indeed, practicing yoga may be more beneficial to the less flexible among us – particularly in light of the issues that accompany Parkinson's, such as rigidity, dystonia, tremor, dyskinesia and imbalance.

What Is Yoga?

The word yoga translates as yoke, or union. Through physical poses, focused breathing concentrated quieting of our busy thoughts, yoga "yokes" – or unites – mind and body. It is a kind of meditation in motion.

Another definition describes yoga as "a series of exercises to attain bodily and mental control and well-being."

In either case, yoga connects the body and mind, bringing awareness, strength, and flexibility to both. Attaining the "perfect" pose is not the goal. Rather, practicing yoga and moving in and out of the poses is a journey in that connection of our outer and inner selves.

Why Do Yoga?

Yoga includes breathing exercises, focused awareness, flowing movement, and static and dynamic stretching. Whether someone is a newcomer or an advanced practitioner, yoga's mindful approach to movement enhances:

- relaxation,
- body awareness,
- flexibility and strength.

Relaxation contributes to sleep, to relieving stress in the body, to maintaining a positive attitude.

Body awareness involves listening to pain, understanding what an arm, leg, or muscle group is capable of doing (as well as understanding the limits), and kindly responding to what is happening inside.

Moving in and out of poses, or asanas, bring flexibility and strength. Some poses focus on one or the other while some focus on both aspects. Strength and flexibility help with posture, balance, stamina.

How Can Yoga Help with Parkinson's Symptoms?

The body is designed to move. Trauma to the brain and dysfunction in the brain's chemistry restrict movement in some parts of the body. The functionality of other areas can be affected, too, through disuse or compensation. Studies show that people with Parkinson's benefit from exercise, which can improve overall quality of life as well as:

- relaxation,
- body awareness,
- flexibility and strength.

Notice a pattern? The benefits of yoga for the everyday practitioner target the same areas as someone with Parkinson's. But since the person with Parkinson's experiences heightened levels of muscle weakness, spasms, rigidity, our yoga practice can be even more beneficial. In yoga, we loosen the body and calm the mind. This relaxation is particularly good for anyone suffering from the insomnia and anxiety that can accompany this disease.

And as our body awareness grows, so too do our skills at listening, understanding, and responding kindly to our bodies. What a good skill to build particularly for our conditions. The body's messages change continuously as symptoms vary, fade, intensify from day to day. Body awareness brings our attention to our strength and flexibility at the moment, increasing oxygen exchange in fuller breathing, all of which allows for increased energy. Talk about a union!

Finally, yoga is also an invitation to turn inward into the side of us that the Parkinson's isn't reaching. Whether it's the right side of your body or the left where the physical symptoms are strongest, our insides still hold the essence of who we are. Yoga doesn't cure the disease, but it can be a path to gently lead us back to ourselves and all this without ever having to pose for a magazine shot.

Afterword

If you decide to attend a yoga class, please be certain that it is a good match for your needs.

Not all yoga instructors are trained in the specialty of working with people with movement disorders. It would be best if the instructor has an understanding of safety issues and adapting and modifying poses to suit both ability and need. For more information, please refer to Yoga for Movement Disorders.

Resources

- Goodwin VA, Richards SH, Taylor RS, Taylor AH, Campbell JL. The effectiveness of exercise intervention for people with Parkinson's disease: a systematic review. *Movement Disord.* 2008;23(5):631-640.
- Argue, J. (2000). *Parkinson's Disease and the Art of Moving.* CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Iyengar, B. K. S (2008). *YOGA: The Path to Holistic Health*, revised edition. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited.
- Le Verrier, Renée. (2008). *Yoga for Movement Disorders: Regaining Strength, Balance and Flexibility for Parkinson's Disease and Dystonia* London: Merit Publishing International, Inc.
- Le Verrier, Renée. (2010). *Companion DVD to Yoga for Movement Disorders.* London: Merit Publishing International, Inc
- Renée's book and DVD may be purchased from our National Office (subject to availability). Phone us for more information or to order.
- Read more about yoga, reflexology and more in our other information pages in the *Alternative Therapies* series.
- Written for Parkinson's Association of Ireland by Renée LeVerrier, a yoga therapist practising in the USA.

Yoga in a Chair

– for the person with Parkinson's
The following exercises are done while you sit on a chair (not a sofa or armchair.)

1. Good Sitting Posture

- Sit back into the chair, with the spine supported,
- Place both feet on the floor about hip width apart,

- Place your hands on your lap with elbows bent, keeping your shoulder blades down.

2. Breathing

Focusing on your breathing helps you to come in to the here and now. Slowing down your breathing helps to quieten the mind and to take away some of the anxiety of our everyday life.

Note: one breath consists of both an in-breath and an out-breath.

- Close the eyes to start bringing your focus inwards, be aware of the in-breath and the out-breath.
- Take a big deep breath in and let it out through the mouth like a sigh (repeat 3 times).
- If possible breathe in and out through your nose if not breathe out through your mouth.
- Place your hands on your stomach and encourage movement underneath your hands feel the rise on the in-breath and the fall on the out-breath.
- Stay with this for the next 6 breaths.

3. Joint Releasing Exercise

- Slowly roll your chin to your chest.
- Open your eyes to look along the floor.
- Slowly roll your chin back up.
- We are going to wake up your body.
- As you breathe in bring your hands up over your head, as you breathe out turn your palms towards the floor and bring them back down.
- Bring your right ear down to your shoulder.
- Bring your left ear down to your shoulder.
- Repeat on both sides again.

4. Wrist Work

- Bring your thumb into the palm of your hand and make a fist.
- Then stretch out all of your fingers.
- With your thumb turned in to your palm, make a fist again, and slowly circle each of your wrists (4 times in both directions).
- Using your opposite hand push your fingers back towards your forearm and hold for 3 breaths on each side.
- Bend and straighten both elbows.
- Place your fingers on your shoulders, and roll your arms around in a circle (4 times in both directions).

5. Legs & Ankles

Ensure that your feet are flat on the floor and your hands are on your lap, elbows bent.

- Moving from your hips, move your upper body around in a circle (4 times in each direction).
- Stretch out your leg, bring your toes towards your shin and then towards the floor (4 times on each side).
- Circle your ankles clockwise and anticlockwise (4 times).

- Bend and straighten your knee (4 times).

6. Spine Movements

- As you breathe in, take your hands up – breathe out come back down (4 times).
- The next time when you breathe in bring your hands up and hold if possible, but if not place your hands on your hips.
- Slowly fold forward from your hips.
- Place both your hands just below your knee to stretch lower back (hold for 3 breaths).
- As you breathe in stretch your right hand up, then as you breathe out take this hand and place it behind the chair. Repeat with your left hand leaving both hands behind the chair.
- Lift the front of your body to introduce a curve into your back (hold for 3 breaths).
- Bring both hands back and place them on your lap.
- Next, take your right hand and grip the right side of the chair, raise your left hand up and stretch to across to the right hand side.
- Repeat on opposite side.

7. Twist

- Place your right hand on your left knee.
- With your left hand hold on to the back of the chair.
- Twist around to look over your left shoulder.
- Repeat on the opposite side.

Now we have brought the spine to its full range of movements and we have also worked all the joints throughout the body.

As I have demonstrated, these movements can be done easily. I hope they have helped to reduce some of the stiffness.

8. Relaxation

Now we are going to do a Relaxation routine, involving the tensing and relaxing of different muscles.

- Start by curling up the toes and lifting your leg slightly off the floor.
- Feel the tension travel up your leg (hold for 3 breaths).
- Release the tension by lowering your leg and stretching out your toes.
- Repeat on opposite side.
- Squeeze your stomach muscles as much as you can (hold for 3 breaths).
- Feel the release when you let go.
- Squeeze your fingers into the palm of your hands as tightly as possible.
- Raise your arm slightly (hold for 3 breaths).
- Feel the tension, then release your fingers and place your hands on your lap.

- Bring your shoulders up to your ears and roll them back down again.
- Feel your shoulder blades moving down your back.
- Then move your eyebrows up and down.
- Feel the spread across your forehead as you release the eyebrows.
- Close your eyes and squeeze your eyes as tightly as you can.
- Release the tension, but keep the eye lids closed.
- Move the jaw from side to side.
- Feel the release in the facial muscles.
- Gently close your mouth, not gripping your teeth.
- Allow yourself to sit in stillness, be aware if there is any tension in your body, encourage it to soften.
- Sit concentrate on your breathing, the in-breath and the out-breath.
- Repeat to yourself 'I am relaxing'.
- Try to sit in this stillness for 15 minutes.

To those of you who have read this routine, I hope you find it beneficial. I have been a yoga teacher for 7 years and recently I have begun to look at the possible health benefits practising yoga has to offer to those with specific ailments. I teach classes for the members of the Parkinson's Association Kildare/Mideast Branch in the Kildare area.

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DISCLAIMER – The information on these pages is not intended to be taken as advice. No changes to your treatment should be made without prior consultation with your doctor or allied health professional.

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