Why Yoga May Be the Best Type of Exercise for MS Patients

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Why You Should Try Yoga for MS

Yoga has a huge fan base: from fitness gurus to serenity seekers, there is a style, series, and level of exertion for everyone. The low impact and slow, calculated movements make yoga one of the safest ways to improve your strength and flexibility, no matter what point you're starting from.

The meditative principles and bendy postures are excellent aspects, but it's the versatility of yoga that really makes it an ideal exercise for those with MS. Before jumping into a yoga practice, learn about which types of yoga are best suited to your physical limitations, how to get the most from your practice, and the risks you need to keep in mind.

How Does Yoga Help MS?

Yoga is a fairly straightforward practice, but there's a lot of benefits packed into a series of poses. Yoga is naturally non-competitive, which means you won't feel pressured to keep up with the activity, and it focuses on proper alignment. Better alignment means better posture and better balance, but that's just one of the ways yoga will help your MS.

With a regular yoga practice, you can expect:

- Fewer muscle spasms
- Less muscle weakness
- Better bladder control
- Less fatigue

Fatigue is particularly disruptive for those with MS, but happily, a recent study shows that yoga relieves lethargy and exhaustion more than any other symptom. The aerobic exercise can certainly help to increase energy levels, but learning deep and controlled breathing can also help your lungs use more oxygen, which will keep you awake and aware.

The Emotional Aspect of Yoga

Yoga has both physical and mental aspects, and both can be incredibly helpful for your daily life. Yoga can teach you to look at the bright side and calm your mind, which will have far-reaching effects on your confidence and motivation.

Even if you don't feel like going to a yoga class, getting through your class will leave you with a sense of accomplishment and wellbeing. However, if it's very warm out or if you're very tired, yoga can be too strenuous, and you may lose motivation. Give your class a miss if you really feel unwell.

How to Stay Safe and Reap the Rewards of Yoga for MS

Yoga can't cure your MS, but it will teach you to focus more on your mind and pay attention to your body, and that can improve your comfort and control over your symptoms. However, you must make sure you don't overextend yourself, which means you should start carefully, and with the right guidance. Here's how to get your MS yoga journey started:

Choose the Right Practice

There are many varieties of yoga to try, and some are simply too intense for those with MS. Power yoga and hot yoga are definitely out, but beware of flow and Ashtanga yoga, as well.

Hatha yoga is the best style to start with: through a series of poses, held for several seconds each, you'll learn to unite your breath with gentle muscle movements to relax and strengthen each major muscle group with relatively little dynamic movement.

Hatha yoga can further be divided into particular types of yoga. Many MS patients find that Iyengar is the most helpful, since the poses are meant to be adapted to a particular condition. Depending on which movements or muscle issues you're dealing with, you'll make use of belts, blocks, and even the instructor's own physical guidance to find the correct posture without any discomfort.

Find the Right Teacher for You

There are plenty of good yoga teachers, but you need an instructor who is trained in working with people with disabilities. Don't be afraid to look around before settling on a teacher, asking as many questions as you need to.

Iyengar yoga instructors are certified only after years of training and evaluation, so ask to see their certificate before you sign up for classes. If you're attending another type of class, the instructor should have at least 10 years of experience, unless they also have a background in physical therapy.

Although you can do yoga poses in your own home once you get a handle on the positions, it's better to follow the guidance of a trained instructor at first. They will be able to adjust your form and tell you when you're straying from the pose. If you do get the OK from your yoga instructor and your doctor to practice at home, try to go through the poses in front of a mirror, so you can monitor your form.

Stick With It

Just like any exercise, "once in a while" won't yield good results. Doctors and yoga instructors suggest that practicing yoga three times a week will bring the biggest benefit, but aim for twice a week at the very start. Begin your practice slowly, with adapted postures and aids, and work up over a month or two before you decide to stop or change your routine.

If you attend a class close to you, you're far more likely to attend it regularly. If there's no Hatha yoga studio in your neighborhood, check out local community centers for a beginner, senior or specialized class that will get you off to a good start.

Resources:

About Health (Yoga and MS)

Yoga with Garth (Yoga and MS)

National MS Society (Yoga)

Everyday Health (How Yoga Helps Multiple Sclerosis)