

## Yoga May Help Low Back Pain. Mental Effects? Not So Much

By JENNIFER CORBETT DOOREN



Low back pain sufferers benefitted from taking yoga or stretching classes, a new study found.

A study believed to be the largest of its kind suggests that the physical aspects of yoga are effective at relieving low back pain, but it didn't find any evidence that yoga provided broader mental benefits.

The study, funded by the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, was published online Monday in the Archives of Internal Medicine. It was led by researchers at Seattle's Group Health Research Institute.

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broader mental benefits. Jennifer Corbett-Dooren explains on Lunch Break.

Smaller studies in the past have suggested that yoga, which involves stretching exercises along with a mental component of deep breathing and other relaxation techniques, was moderately effective at easing symptoms of chronic lower back pain.

It was thought the combination of stretching and relaxation relieved back pain, according to previous studies.

But the current study found both yoga and stretching were equally as effective, suggesting the benefits of yoga are attributable to the physical benefits of stretching and not to its mental components, said the study's lead author, Karen J. Sherman, senior investigator at Group Health Research Institute.



It involved 228 adults with chronic, low back pain that didn't have a specific cause such as a spinal disc problem. They were divided into three groups to compare two types of classes with patients using a self-care book that provided instruction on exercises and stretches to help treat lower pain.

The people who took classes may have been more likely to complete the exercises. More than 80% of the participants in the self-care group reported reading some of the book and doing some exercises, but time spent on the exercises was typically less than the class groups. "They need that class format to get started," Ms. Sherman said.

About 50% of patients in the yoga or stretching classes reported feeling much better or completely better in relation to their back pain and function compared to about 20% of patients in the self-care group, said Ms. Sherman.

Twice as many patients in the yoga and stretching groups reported decreased medication use during the study compared to the self-care group.

About 90 patients each were randomly assigned to attend 75-minute weekly yoga classes or weekly stretching classes for 12 weeks. The people who attended the classes were also instructed to practice for 20 minutes a day at home in between classes.

Another group involved 45 patients who were given a 200-page book with advice on exercising, lifestyle modifications and managing flare-ups.

The type of yoga used in the study was viniyoga, a style of hatha yoga, that adapts exercises for each person's physical condition. The stretching classes involved 15 stretches targeting the lower back and legs were which held for a full minute repeated for a total of 52 minutes of stretching.

The study measured changes in back pain and functional status at the beginning of the study and at six weeks, 12 weeks and six months.

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