



take it to the mat

At a time when the whole world seems to be spinning, sometimes the best thing to do is to get moving.

BY LAURIE WERTICH

FOR MOST CANCER PATIENTS, treatment is probably not the ideal time to spend hours sweating in the gym or to start training for a marathon. That said, it's important to keep moving, and a little exercise goes a long way toward promoting well-being and reducing stress.

Yoga is a gentle, low-impact form of movement that has been shown to reduce stress and improve quality of life. In fact, several studies have documented that cancer patients who practice yoga experience reduced fatigue, anxiety, and stress as well as improved social and emotional well-being.¹ In addition, studies among breast cancer patients who practice yoga have shown reduced cortisol levels,

improved depression, and relief from chronic pain.^{2,3}

Although the benefits are well documented, some patients may shy away from yoga, intimidated by the thought of trying something new. Though it may be intimidating to come to the mat for the first time, most find the rewards well worth the effort.

What Exactly Is Yoga?

Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning “union.” The ancient practice promotes a union of mind, body, and spirit through physical postures (*asanas*), breathing practices (*pranayama*), and meditation (*dhyana*). Yoga is a practice,

not a religion, and anyone can choose to practice yoga without compromising individual religious or spiritual beliefs.

Many people approach yoga as a physical practice—and it is—but it is also an opportunity to breathe and quiet the mind, much like a moving meditation. Most people find themselves more relaxed and peaceful as a result of the practice.

There are many different types of yoga—from gentle, relaxing restorative yoga to more athletic, challenging *vinayasa*-style yoga and everything in between. In other words, there is a yoga class for everybody (or every *body*), including those with health challenges.



We navigate yoga in the same way we navigate cancer treatment and life—one breath at a time.

Yoga and Cancer

Yoga may be an ideal form of exercise for cancer patients because it enhances range of motion, flexibility, and strength without being too aggressive or high impact. It gently allows patients to maintain physical activity without overdoing it.

Nicole Hamory, a certified yoga instructor in Salt Lake City, Utah, who specializes in working with cancer patients, says, “The reconnection to the body and mind through yoga is an ideal way for cancer survivors to tune back into vitality, strength, and clarity.”

Because the practice is individual, students can work within their own limits on their own mats.

Beyond Cancer

Perhaps the best testament to the benefits of yoga is that many people who discover it during cancer treatment continue to practice it long after treatment is over. Many survivors find the practice to be a useful tool for minimizing long-term side effects of cancer treatment, including lymphedema. Most report that it becomes a critical tool for coping with stress.

“Even if a yoga student is physically limited, just the deep breathing and contemplative mental state serve as powerful tools to wellness,” says Hamory.

Taking It to the Mat

To get started, all you need is a mat,

comfortable clothing, and an open mind. A qualified yoga instructor will help guide you through the practice that is right for your body and your current health condition.

That first class may seem daunting, but we navigate yoga in the same way we navigate cancer treatment and life—one breath at a time. Chances are that after that first class, you’ll look forward to the next time you can find your way to the mat. **CFThrive**

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