

FALL 2009

# women

Health | Nutrition | Treatment | Community | Cancer



## HEART HEALTH

SIMPLE STEPS *for*  
BETTER HEALTH

## ASCO

The Latest  
Breast Cancer  
News

Sheryl LESSONS  
to LIVE BY  
Crow



# Cancer Patients Stick with Yoga

Yoga seems to have officially surpassed trendy and entered the mainstream. There is a yoga class for everyone—young, old, pregnant, injured, athletic, and, more recently, those affected by cancer.

**Y**OGA IS A PRACTICE; there is no finish line and no perfection. Practitioners of yoga are simply encouraged to be in the present, work at their own pace, and move in a way that honors how the body feels in any given moment. This makes it an ideal form of movement for cancer patients and survivors, whose physical health may be constantly fluctuating.

Still, with or without cancer, yoga can be intimidating for newcomers. The mere image of experienced yogis contorting themselves into pretzel-like positions is a strong barrier for the rest of us mere mortals. Yoga instructors tell students not to push the body beyond its natural limits, often saying, “If you can’t breathe comfortably in a posture, you shouldn’t be there.”

Cancer patients faced with physical pain, fatigue, or nausea could easily retort that no posture is comfortable; with the right instruction and tools, however, yoga is accessible to everyone.

## Defining 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



Reverse Warrior



Wide Suspension Bridge



Modified Forward Fold

can choose to practice yoga without compromising individual religious or spiritual beliefs.

Many people come to yoga for the physical benefits, and as a byproduct they learn to breathe and quiet the mind. Most people find themselves more relaxed and peaceful as a result of the practice.

Nicole Hamory, a yoga instructor in Salt Lake City, Utah, who specializes in working with cancer patients, sees yoga as the perfect tool for survivors because it is gentle, individual, and fun. “Yoga is a peaceful way of having people reconnect to their body without the ego,” she says. “They don’t have to get in there and log miles or see how fast they can go. Instead they can get a deeper sense of wisdom about how their body functions by tuning into their body.” And, Nicole says, the practice is uniquely suited to survivors because it offers a way to relieve tension: “Anything that helps relieve stress and helps them cope is good.”

### SOLA Yoga Stikk

Despite the many benefits that yoga can provide, some survivors may still be apprehensive. Nicole has found a unique way to remove the intimidation factor and to make yoga gentler and more

### Yoga, Yoga Everywhere— but Which Class to Take?

If you’re a cancer survivor, take note of these tips for finding the most appropriate class. Look for a class that is:

**Specifically designed for cancer survivors**

**Restorative in nature**

**Small in size for individual attention**

**Incorporates the use of props that support movement and alignment**

physically accessible to anyone who wants to practice—a wooden dowel that she calls the SOLA Yoga™ Stikk.

A happy accident, the idea for the SOLA (an acronym for *self-awareness, observation, love, and acceptance*) Stikk came to Nicole while she was cross-country skiing on a cold, winter day. She began using her ski pole to do some yoga stretches and experienced an aha moment; before long she traded her ski pole for a 4-foot wooden dowel and introduced it in her yoga classes to help students hold poses longer, find intuitive alignment, and deepen their stretches.

“Necessity is the mother of invention,” Nicole says. “People are unsure about their bodies, balancing, or how far they can go, so I started incorporating a stick into the practice.” But the SOLA Yoga Stikk is more than a simple dowel—it’s a support system, a leveraging tool, and sometimes even an artistic totem—and it’s revolutionizing the way people do yoga.

Nicole emphasizes that yoga is so much more than stretching—



Extended Side Angle Pose



Side Stretch



Standing Bow Pose

it provides an opportunity for students to tune into their bodies and their emotions. And the range of students who can benefit, Nicole says, is broad: “Some people come to class who have ports in their chest or a colostomy bag.”

## Sticking with the Stretch

Linda Reed was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer in 1998 and was told that she had a 50 percent chance of being alive after five years. She underwent surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, and 11 years later she is alive and well. Linda now suffers from lymphedema, however, a debilitating and painful long-term side effect of cancer treatment in which lymph fluid builds up, causing swelling and discomfort.

One danger of lymphedema is that when the lymph passages are clogged, the body cannot fight infection. After being hospitalized for a serious infection, Linda discovered SOLA Yoga. She credits the practice with reducing her stress as well as providing unique stretches for the parts of her body affected by the lymphedema and muscle damage from radiation.

Linda says that the SOLA Yoga Stikk “gives a lovely stretch that is especially effective through the underarm, upper arm, and rib areas as well as the back and the legs. I think this has contributed significantly to clearing these passages and reducing the lymphedema. I don’t get as good a stretch in this area in any other way, including the yoga standard, downward dog. The lymphede-

## Finding SOLA Stikk Yoga

**Huntsman Cancer Institute**  
([www.huntsmancancer.org](http://www.huntsmancancer.org))

**Greentree Yoga**  
(<http://greentreeyoga.org>)

**Women Beyond Cancer Retreats**  
([www.womenbeyondcancer.org](http://www.womenbeyondcancer.org))

ma will never go away, but it can be managed, and the SOLA Yoga helps.”

Linda had tried other types of yoga, but SOLA Stikk Yoga was the one that stuck. “My previous yoga experiences created a lot of tension. I was desperately trying to mimic the difficult poses and maintain bal-

ance, which created more tension, not less,” she says. “The use of the stick helps me feel supported and more able to do the poses, so I am not fighting with my balance. I can be more confident and relaxed. The stick is a great tool to enhance and focus the stretches.”

## Stick with Style

According to Nicole, the SOLA Yoga Stikk is more than a yoga prop—it can also serve as an individual totem or a means of artistic expression. In an effort to bring the physical and emotional benefits of the SOLA Yoga Stikk to even more survivors, Nicole has teamed up with Women Beyond Cancer, a nonprofit organization that offers retreats nationwide.

During the retreats, women design their own sticks, making them totems of their journey with cancer—and bringing in an element of creativity and fun. Once their totem is complete, the women learn how to incorporate the stick into their yoga practice.

“It’s important that they have fun,” Nicole says. “It isn’t all nuts and bolts and alignment. That’s important, too, but I want them moving and grooving and challenging themselves in new ways.” ❀