

Yoga Benefits Polio Survivor

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Yoga has provided benefits to me in improving breathing, maintaining flexibility, improving balance, and reducing stress. I have post-polio syndrome with loss of muscle strength, and I do not seek to gain strength from yoga. I do have pulmonary problems, and the development of good breathing habits from yoga practice has noticeably improved my performance on pulmonary function tests. A stretching routine works off "morning stiffness" more rapidly and keeps lower back pain and sciatica away. Habits developed from both yoga and Alexander Technique make me much more aware of my body and how it is functioning.

Yoga is very popular these days, and it has developed many forms. The yoga I practice is the so-called gentle version of hatha yoga. I discovered it by accident about six years ago (1996). To my great good fortune, my first instructor had studied some anatomy and physiology as part of her yoga training, and she had a great interest in helping those with disabilities to

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find alternate ways to perform poses made difficult by the disability. (Explore her website at www.yoga4u2.com for more on her style of practice.)

As you are taking classes, you should strive to develop your own daily practice at home with advice from the instructor. Some may offer an individual development session for a fee. While the cost of yoga classes (in the Washington, DC, area) typically run \$13-17 per session, an individual session can run \$50 or more. If you have severe disability, a few private sessions to find adaptations for your particular body may be of more benefit than a group session that tries to help all and hurt none.

The typical yoga class lasts 60-90 minutes. Within this time, you may do some warm-ups, some breathing exercises, some meditation, some eye exercises. You mostly do "poses," aimed at flexing and stretching all parts of the body. Emphasis is on flexing the spine in all directions – forward, backwards, and sideways. Poses are done lying down, sitting on the floor (or a chair), on hands and knees, and standing.

Balance poses involve standing on one leg at a time. There may also be inverted poses. In a gentle class, inverted poses are limited to lying down and having your legs up on the wall or a chair. The class always ends with 10-15 minutes of complete relaxation.

Is it for you? The first requirement for most yoga classes is the ability to get down onto the floor and get up by yourself. Occasionally a class is offered for people who cannot do this, but can sit



in a chair. Such classes are perhaps offered in assisted-living homes, hospitals, etc. Otherwise look in recreational centers, adult education programs, YMCAs, yoga studios, and, maybe, health clubs.

In all instances, if the class is called "gentle yoga," interview the instructor for certification by a yoga organization, and experience in working with individuals with disabilities. Does the instructor know what each pose is meant to do for your body, and know alternative poses that might be easier for you? An unqualified or inexperienced instructor can lead you to hurt yourself.

You might also check with your physician or other health care professional for advice. In my experience, health professionals who do not have firsthand knowledge of yoga may tend to be negative. If so, ask for specifics, as it applies to you, and take that advice with you to class.

There are also books and videos on yoga, and even a few aimed at rehabilitation. There may be some on "gentle" yoga, but I have not seen them. I personally doubt that you could develop a practice for yourself this way, without personal instruction, and suspect that you might hurt yourself, if not be outright discouraged. ■