

Yoga for Seniors



Bending Toward Natural Pain Relief for Arthritis

By Cheryl LeClair

Maybe you've noticed back or neck pain, perhaps your knees or hips ache and just don't move like they used to. Your physician's diagnosis: osteoarthritis. His recommendations include a gentle exercise program and yoga may be just what the doctor ordered.

The practice of yoga dates back 5,000 years. This ancient practice of integrating the mind, body, and breath has gained overwhelming popularity in the United States in recent years. A gentle yoga practice is an excellent addition to the medical treatment of arthritis. Yoga's gentle movement can increase endurance and range of motion; strengthens the muscles surrounding the joints and increases stability. Keeping the affected joints moving assists in the prevention of bone spur formation and promotes the circulation of synovial fluid. This fluid cushions the joints and allows the bones to move smoothly against each other. In addition, synovial fluid also nourishes the cartilage within the joints.

A consistent yoga practice also supports a healthy lifestyle. Being overweight or obese increases the stress on weight-bearing joints. Because yoga increases your awareness, you become more mindful of your food choices and opt for a healthier diet. In addition, yoga increases the overall sense of well-being and promotes healthful coping mechanisms for pain.

Before beginning a yoga practice, seek your physician's approval, as with any other fitness program. Secondly, seek the guidance of a well-trained, experienced yoga instructor. The instructor should be knowledgeable in anatomy, as well as the proper alignment of yoga asanas, or postures. A good instructor will discuss your condition and address any concerns you may have. He or she will also be happy to communicate with your healthcare provider if you wish. The instructor can offer modifications to the poses to accommodate limitations, and make your yoga practice safe and enjoyable. Investing in private lessons is very wise, especially for a beginner. The instructor will work with you one-on-one and give detailed instruction in proper alignment of the postures and breathing.

Yoga should never be painful! Honor your body and its innate knowledge. If you experience pain or discomfort, you should come out of the posture immediately. A good instructor will never force your body into a posture. They will offer gentle guidance and will allow you to perform the movement yourself.

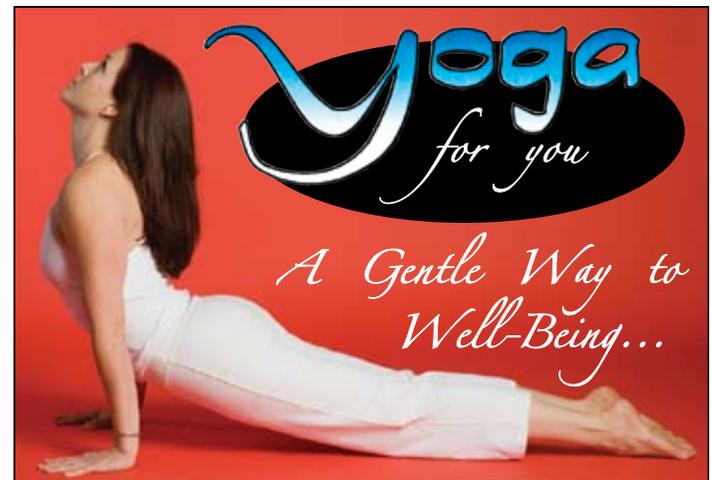
Let your instructor know what you are feeling. Everyone's body is unique and unless you communicate what you are feeling, your instructor may not be aware of what you are experiencing.

Yoga may be done while seated, or a chair may be used during standing poses to assist in balancing. Chair yoga is still quite effective and offers persons of all levels of ability to experience the gentle, natural relief that yoga provides.

Do not begin your yoga practice during an active flare-up of arthritis. If you experience a flare-up after beginning your practice, be sure to let your instructor know. She will modify your practice to accommodate your condition.

Finally, know that yoga is a personal journey and it should never be competitive. We begin our practices at different times, and we are all at different points in our yoga experience. Turn your attention inward, breathe, and experience the natural healing of mind and body that yoga offers.

Cheryl LeClair is a Yoga Alliance instructor and completed Duke Integrative Medicine's "Yoga for Seniors Therapist" training in 2008, with a focus on osteoarthritis of the spine. Cheryl teaches yoga at Yoga for You studio in Morehead City, as well as gyms in Swansboro and Cape Carteret. ■



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