

Special Considerations When Working with Older Adults

Seniors Can Be the Most Complex—and the Most Rewarding—Yoga Clients

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We are in the midst of one of the greatest sociological shifts in history: global aging.

Sometimes called the “Silver Tsunami,” this phenomenon of increased longevity among unprecedented numbers of people promises to dramatically transform our world. Seniors ages 65 and older comprise the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. population.¹ This group is expected to more than double (from 8% of Americans to 20%) by the year 2050.² And there will be a huge jump in the “oldest old”—nearly 5% of Americans will be 85 and older in 2050, compared to just over 1% in 1994.^{2,3}

Today's seniors are a diverse group, including healthy and fit individuals able to run marathons, compete in master's athletic events, and even stand on their heads. However, much more common are those who fit the profile of an average 75-year-old in America: someone who has three chronic conditions and uses five prescription drugs.⁴ Many of the medications taken for common conditions such as high blood pressure, pain, and depression can increase the risk of falling.⁵ Among people over 65, falls are the number one cause of fractures, hospital admissions for trauma, loss of independence, and injury deaths.⁶ More than half of all adults over age 65 have a disability—such as difficulty hearing, seeing, or walking—and more than a third have a severe disability.⁷

These sobering statistics present a tremendous opportunity for yoga therapists who want to help older adults improve their strength and balance; reduce fall risk; and enhance function, mood, and wellbeing. However, these data also highlight the potential for harm that could occur if yoga therapists do not appropriately adapt the practice to be safe and effective for seniors.

How Yoga Can Help

In general, as people grow older, the heart and blood vessels become stiffer, biological systems become slower to react and recover, bones weaken, lung capacity decreases, and muscle mass declines.⁸



But while aging is inevitable, infirmity is not. One of the best ways to maintain vitality and slow down age-related decline is to get regular, moderate physical activity, which offers a myriad of benefits ranging from boosting health of the heart, lungs, muscles, and bones to managing stress, improving mood, and preventing or delaying many diseases and disabilities.⁹ While yoga practice can certainly meet—or exceed—the public health mandate to get 30 minutes of moderate activity, five days a week, it offers much more than physical exercise. Breathing and meditation practices can influence emotional states, and yoga's guiding principles can counter toxic emotions such as anger and hostility. When practiced with others, yoga may also help relieve loneliness and isolation, which is common among seniors. While research on yoga's impact on seniors is in its infancy, a growing body of evidence suggests that yoga offers a host of physiological and psychological benefits of

particular concern to older adults, including reducing heart rate and blood pressure, relieving anxiety and depression, and easing back pain.¹⁰ Current studies are examining yoga's therapeutic effects on a broad array of ailments, including heart failure, arthritis, chronic pain, cancer,

and Parkinson's disease. Evidence suggests that yoga not only improves health-related quality of life but also enhances walking and balance, muscle strength, cardiovascular health, and sleep,¹¹ and it may even improve lung function.¹²

Waking the Sleeping Giant

Although yoga may help prevent and relieve many health concerns common to older adults, like any physical activity it can have risks. In fact, research by Dr. Gale Greendale, a professor of medicine and gerontology at the University of California—Los Angeles, uncovered a yoga-related injury phenomenon among seniors that she dubbed “waking the sleeping giant.”¹³ In her study to assess whether yoga could decrease hyperkyphosis of the spine, participants took twice-weekly, hour-long classes for 12 weeks and experienced significant improvement in the condition.¹⁴ Unexpectedly, approximately 60%

of the participants (120 ambulatory people ages 60 to 90) developed musculoskeletal soreness and/or pain significant enough to require modification of their poses. Also, those with preexisting musculoskeletal conditions who hadn't been bothered by those conditions were particularly likely to experience muscle or joint side effects.

"Most study participants had preexisting conditions in their hips, back, knees, or shoulders that were quiescent until we started putting them through yoga poses," Dr. Greendale noted.¹³ "And we were already using versions of poses that were adapted in ways that we thought would be safer for seniors. Even in robust seniors, the musculoskeletal risks were there, lying dormant until we woke them up." The bottom line, she said: "Yoga's benefits outweigh its risks as long as people start at the right level, don't progress too fast, and make appropriate modifications."

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The complex nature of teaching older adult students is a central reason why we created our Yoga for Seniors teacher trainings (for information, please visit www.yoga4seniors.com). A prerequisite for enrollment is completion of at least a 200-hour yoga teacher training or equivalent. Our priority is creating a safe and welcoming environment for each student. Equally essential is ensuring that this imperative of safety does not create a sense of fear or limitation but rather invites the empowering recognition of yoga's highest teachings that our true nature is already whole.

Understand Common Health Challenges

More than 70 million Americans ages 50 and older—four out of five older adults—have at least one chronic condition, more than half have more than one condition, and 11 million live with five or more.¹⁵ Sleep disturbances also become more common with age,¹⁶ and 35% of women and 48% of men over age 65 reporting trouble hearing.¹⁷ The most prevalent chronic conditions among adults ages 65 and over are:

- High blood pressure: 57% of men, 54% of women.
- Arthritis: 45% of men, 56% of women.
- Heart disease: 37% of men, 26% of women.
- Cancer: 28% of men, 21% of women.
- Diabetes: 24% of men, 18% of women.
- Asthma: 10% of men, 13% of women.
- COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease): 10% of men, 11% of women.
- Stroke: 9% of men, 8% of women.¹⁸

Chronic pain is a common symptom reported by about half of all community-dwelling older adults and it often interferes with their ability to function.¹⁹ Mental health conditions are also prevalent among older adults and may adversely affect their physical health and ability to live independently. An estimated 15–20% of older adults in the United States have experienced depression, and approximately 11% have anxiety disorders.²⁰

In addition to known, diagnosed diseases, seniors are also at a higher risk than younger people for certain disorders that may be present without symptoms. These so-called "silent" diseases include osteoporosis, heart disease, and hypertension. It's quite common for older adults to have one or more of these disorders without being aware that they have the condition. In fact, the first symptom of osteoporosis may be a broken bone, and the first symptom of heart disease may be a heart attack or death. For these reasons, it is critical to start slowly and build capacity over time.

Advanced age significantly increases the risk of fracture—for both men and women—with small-framed Caucasian and Asian women at greatest risk. An estimated 35% of postmenopausal white women have osteoporosis, but may not be aware that they have this bone-weakening disorder and are at an increased risk of fracture. In addition, more than 33 million American adults over 50 have low bone mass (sometimes called osteopenia) and some increased fracture risk.²¹ For this reason, positions that can overload compromised bones, such as loaded spinal flexion and

end-range rotation, should be avoided in people with known or suspected bone loss.^{22,23}

Age-related changes in the cardiovascular system include a loss of elasticity in the blood vessels that makes older adults more susceptible to both sudden elevation of blood pressure and dizziness from low blood pressure. These blood pressure changes can be related to breath holding, heavy lifting, and changes in posture (for example, getting up from lying down). Be sure older adult clients take their time changing positions—from supine or prone to sitting and/or from sitting to standing. Having a support nearby in case someone feels dizzy or unsteady is advisable. It's also important that older adults avoid holding their breath, which can raise blood pressure and cause muscle cramping.²⁴ Encourage clients to keep their breath flowing and comfortable, and be sure that they do not feel rushed or pressured. Teaching simple breath awareness and efficient breathing mechanics through basic practices, such as the relaxed abdominal breath, can be deeply therapeutic.

A Mature Approach to Practice

Along with the challenges involved in teaching yoga to older adults come unique opportunities. Seniors, perhaps more than any other age group, recognize that yoga is not just about postures, and they tend to be extremely receptive to the profound benefits offered on all levels by the yoga practice: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Unlike younger practitioners, who are often distracted by the desire for a shapelier body, older adults typically have an eagerness and deep appreciation for the experience of ease and union that is the true heart of the yoga practice. They are also typically more interested in function than in form or appearance. Seniors are more often motivated to practice so that they can do things that are important to them, such as play on the floor with their grandchildren, climb stairs, and/or avoid falling.

In addition, being part of a community, the yogic concept of *sangha*, tends to be particularly meaningful to older adults, offering yoga therapists the chance to encourage nourishing connections when teaching in a group setting. This social support itself can have profound health

benefits. Strong scientific evidence indicates that adults who are more socially connected are healthier and live longer than their more-isolated peers, and that individuals with the lowest level of social involvement are more likely to die than those with greater involvement.²⁵ Older adults also tend to be quite receptive to the spiritual dimension of yoga practice, since they frequently have reminders of life's impermanence as they deal with their own health challenges and as their loved ones become ill or die. This presents a precious opportunity to celebrate the profound gift of breath.

Even the most compromised older adults may find healing through what we call the “as if” practice, in which someone visualizes himself doing the posture, activating any muscles available for this effort, and patterning the breath with the visualized movement. For example, if a person is unable to extend his arms overhead, he would see himself lifting his arms, activate any muscles he can that would be involved in this movement, inhale as he envisions his arms lifting and exhale as he envisions his arms returning to rest. Research suggests that this mental imagining practice is surprisingly effective in actually strengthening muscle fibers.²⁶ In fact, athletes have long used imagery to train for competition, speed recovery from injury, and enhance performance.²⁷

One of our teacher training graduates, Lucia Plata, in Bogotá, Colombia, used this “as if” practice for nine months with a student who had ALS, a neurodegenerative disease that causes muscle weakness and atrophy. Having lost almost all of his motor control to the disease process, this gentleman painstakingly typed out (using an eye-blink recognition computer system) a testimonial about his experience with the yoga practice. He concluded with this statement: “That which has imprisoned my body has freed my soul.”

This is a poignant reminder that, in the end, yoga is not defined by the structure of the posture but by the quality of awareness. **YTT**

This material is excerpted and adapted with permission from the upcoming book, Relax Into Yoga for Seniors: A Six-Week Program for Strength, Balance, Flexibility, and Pain Relief, by Kimberly Carson and Carol Krucoff, New Harbinger, November 2016.

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