

How Yoga Helps Reduce the Pain from Cancer Treatment

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Although cancer touches one in three women and one in two men nationwide, more people than ever are living longer after treatment. New and promising research heralds the benefits of yoga practice post-treatment. Yoga practices that include movement, breath work, and meditation can help survivors better tolerate residual pain, cancer-related fatigue, lymphedema, peripheral neuropathy, insomnia and anxiety that often accompany treatment and can linger on for years after treatment.

Yoga for Cancer Pain Relief

My clients often report lingering pain from treatment. Some pain is localized to radiation treatment or surgery sites. Certain chemotherapy drugs that are given to prevent recurrence of cancer also cause joint pain. Yoga's gentle joint mobilization can help to alleviate stiffness and increase flexibility, as well as ensure that the joints stay lubricated and the muscles supple. This short practice is designed to apply a full range of yogic tools, including intention-setting, mudra, asana, pranayama, and relaxation, to alleviating pain.

Yoga Practice Tips

- Do a little yoga each day to give yourself the time and space to heal. Make yoga a permanent part of your life after cancer.
- Stay mindful of the body and breath throughout the practice. Only move in a comfortable range of motion. If you become uncomfortable, dizzy, nauseated or breathless, stop immediately and rest for a few moments.
- For this practice a yoga mat and blanket or pillow will be helpful.



Figure 1: Anjali Mudra

Setting Your Sankalpa with Anjali Mudra

Intention setting, or creating a sankalpa, is an important first step toward using yoga as a healing practice. It serves as a reminder of your goals during this time.

1. Begin sitting in a comfortable seated position with your palms together at your heart. This is Anjali Mudra (prayer gesture) and helps to draw your awareness inward.
2. Take a few deeper breaths and recall your current challenges. Recognize that challenges are opportunities for growth and healing.
3. Begin to imagine the best possible outcome for your current situation, setting aside any feelings of doubt that arise.
4. Allow your sankalpa to arise formed into a simple statement phrased in the present tense

beginning with “I am”, or “My”. If you find it difficult to create an intention at this time, use the statement “My body is free from pain.” State your sankalpa silently three times and trust that it will manifest with patience and repetition.

Matsya Mudra for Pain

Matsya mudra may also help you to release muscular tension and send nourishing energy to the joints.

1. Hold your palms face down in front of your torso, then stack the palm of your right hand over the back of your left.
2. Reach outwards through your thumbs so that the hands look a little bit like a fish, which is where this mudra gets its name.
3. Hold this gesture for a few minutes and notice how it feels, then release the hands.



Figure 2: Matsya Mudra

Reclining Floor Flow

The reclining floor flow is a simple series of movements that may help to alleviate pain in the hips, lower spine and shoulders. It can be done on the floor or on a bed.

1. Recline with your legs extended. As you inhale, raise your arms over your head to a comfortable position.
2. As you exhale, draw your right knee towards your chest.

3. On your next inhale, draw your right knee out and open your left arm out from your shoulder.
4. Exhale and pass your knee across your body to your left hand and rotate your pelvis and lower spine to the left.
5. Inhale and bring your leg and torso back to the center and extend your right foot upwards, clapping your hands behind your thigh.
6. Exhale and draw your knee into your chest.
7. Inhale and return to the starting position with arms extended over your head, and your legs extended on the floor.
8. Repeat the entire sequence of movements with your left leg, alternating sides up to five times each.



Figure 3: Reclining Floor Flow

Windshield Wipers

This reclining pose is helpful if you are feeling especially fatigued. It helps to release tension in the lower back and outer hips.

1. Recline comfortably on the floor or bed with your knees bent and feet a little wider than your body's width apart.
2. As you inhale, rock your knees to the right keeping your feet on the floor.
3. On exhale, draw your belly in to bring your knees to the center.
4. Repeat to the left side and alternate between sides five to ten times.



Figure 4: Windshield Wipers

Adhama Svasa Pranayama (Belly Breath)

Bringing conscious awareness to the natural breathing process can have a profoundly relaxing and healing effect on the mind and body. Breathing consciously into your lower belly breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system which reduces the level of stress hormones in your body and may lessen the experience of pain.

1. Recline comfortably with support under your head and knees if needed. Your blanket or pillow will come in handy here, or simply leave the knees bent.
2. Close your eyes and feel your breath moving smoothly in and out of your nostrils.
3. Place your hands on your lower belly and as you inhale, feeling the lower belly inflate as if there were a balloon inside.
4. As you exhale, feel the belly deflate softly.

Continue to focus on the gentle expansion of your inhale followed by the surrender of your exhale and how your belly moves with your breath for up to 5 minutes.



Figure 5: Adhama Svasa

Savasana (Relaxation Pose)

It is important to give yourself a few minutes at the end of your practice to rest in stillness and silence so that the gifts of the practice can be fully integrated into your body and mind.

1. Recline with your legs extended and feet relaxed to sides.
2. Rest your arms to the sides and turn your palms to face the ceiling.
3. You may use support under your knees for low back pain or add a folded blanket under your head. Relax here for at least 5 minutes.



Figure 6: Savasana

When you are ready to sit back up, take your time rolling over to your favorite side, resting there for a few moments while you repeat your sankalpa from the beginning of the practice. Then use the strength of your arms to press yourself back up to a seated position. Namaste'

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