



RESEARCH NEWS

Yoga is reasonable alternative to physical therapy for lower back pain, say researchers

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Yoga is as effective as physical therapy for treating lower back pain and may be a reasonable alternative, a randomised controlled trial published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* has found.¹

The study found that a yoga class designed for chronic low back pain in patients was as effective as physical therapy for reducing pain, improving function, and lowering the use of pain medicine.

Researchers looked at a racially diverse group of 320 adults with chronic low back pain who were predominantly from low income backgrounds. They randomly assigned them to three groups: 12 weekly yoga classes, 15 visits with a physical therapist over 12 weeks, or an educational book and newsletters about coping with chronic low back pain. Those in the yoga group attended a median of seven classes, and those in the physical therapy group attended a median of seven appointments.

After the 12 week treatment phase the study included a 40 week maintenance phase, where the yoga participants were randomly assigned to yoga drop-in classes or home practice and the physical therapy participants were randomly assigned to booster sessions or home practice.

The study found that the yoga programme was non-inferior to individually delivered physical therapy for change in back function and pain. Yoga was not found to be superior to education for function and pain. However, the researchers said that participants in both the yoga and the physical therapy groups were more likely to have clinically meaningful improvements in function than those in the education group.

Yoga and physical therapy participants were more likely than those in the education group to discontinue pain medicine. At 12 weeks 75% of patients in the education group had used pain medicine in the previous week, compared with 55% in the yoga group and 54% in the physical therapy group. Improvements

in the yoga and physical therapy groups were maintained at one year regardless of whether patients were assigned to ongoing yoga classes, physical therapy booster sessions, or home practice only.

The authors concluded, “A structured yoga programme for patients with chronic low back pain may be a reasonable alternative to physical therapy depending upon patient preferences, availability, and cost.”

In January this year a Cochrane review of the evidence concluded that yoga may reduce the symptoms of lower back pain by a small amount in the short term but that longer term studies were needed.²



- 1 Saper R, Lemaster C, Delitto A, et al. Yoga, physical therapy or education for chronic low back pain: a randomised noninferiority trial. *Ann Intern Med* 2017;(Jun). doi:10.7326/M16-2579.
- 2 Wise J. Yoga may improve symptoms of lower back pain, says Cochrane review. *BMJ* 2017;357:j183. doi:10.1136/bmj.j183 pmid:28082371.

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