

## Yoga as a Complementary Therapy for Physical and Mental Health: An Evidence-Based Review

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### Abstract

Yoga is an ancient mind–body practice that integrates physical postures, breathing techniques, relaxation, and meditation. In recent decades, yoga has gained increasing recognition as a complementary therapeutic approach for promoting physical health, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life. The growing burden of chronic non-communicable diseases, stress-related disorders, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and lifestyle-related health problems has increased interest in non-pharmacological interventions such as yoga. This evidence-based review aims to examine the therapeutic role of yoga in improving physical and mental health and to summarize the available evidence regarding its potential application as a complementary therapy.

Although yoga should not be considered a replacement for appropriate medical or psychological treatment, it may serve as a safe and beneficial complementary therapy when practiced appropriately and under qualified guidance. The evidence supports the integration of yoga into health promotion and selected therapeutic programs. However, further high-quality, large-scale, and standardized research is required to determine the optimal type, frequency, duration, and long-term effectiveness of yoga interventions.

**Keywords:** Yoga, Complementary Therapy, Physical Health, Mental Health, Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Well-Being, Quality of Life.

### INTRODUCTION

Health is a multidimensional concept that encompasses physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being. Modern lifestyles characterized by physical inactivity, unhealthy dietary practices, occupational stress, inadequate sleep, and increased exposure to psychosocial pressures have contributed significantly to the growing prevalence of chronic diseases and mental health concerns. Non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, obesity, musculoskeletal conditions, and mental health disorders, continue to create substantial challenges for individuals and healthcare systems worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression are increasingly recognized as important public health concerns. Persistent stress can negatively affect multiple physiological systems and may contribute to sleep disturbances, hypertension, cardiovascular problems,

impaired immunity, and reduced quality of life. Similarly, anxiety and depression can influence social functioning, occupational performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Therefore, there is an increasing need for effective, accessible, and holistic interventions that can complement conventional healthcare approaches.<sup>2</sup>

Yoga is a traditional mind–body practice that originated in ancient India. Modern therapeutic applications of yoga generally involve a combination of physical postures or asanas, breathing practices known as pranayama, relaxation techniques, and meditation. Depending on the style and therapeutic objective, yoga interventions may emphasize physical movement, breathing, mindfulness, or a combination of these components.<sup>3</sup>

The World Health Organization recognizes the importance of promoting physical activity and mental well-being as essential components of health. Yoga has attracted

increasing attention because it can address both physical and psychological dimensions of health. Unlike interventions that focus exclusively on a single organ system or symptom, yoga provides an integrated approach involving physical movement, breathing awareness, relaxation, and mental concentration.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence from clinical trials, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses suggests that yoga may have beneficial effects on several health outcomes. These include improvements in flexibility, balance, physical functioning, stress reduction, anxiety management, depressive symptoms, sleep quality, and quality of life. Yoga has also been investigated as a supportive intervention for individuals with chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, metabolic disorders, cancer-related symptoms, and other long-term health conditions.<sup>5,6</sup>

Despite the increasing popularity of yoga, it is important to evaluate its therapeutic role on the basis of scientific evidence. Yoga practices vary considerably in terms of style, intensity, duration, instructor expertise, and participant characteristics. Therefore, the interpretation of research findings requires careful consideration of methodological differences among studies.<sup>7,8</sup>

The present review aims to examine the available evidence regarding yoga as a complementary therapy for physical and mental health. The review focuses on the potential benefits of yoga, its possible mechanisms of action, applications in selected physical and psychological conditions, limitations of current evidence, and implications for healthcare practice.<sup>9,10</sup>

## Objectives of the Review

### The objectives of this review were:

1. To examine the therapeutic benefits of yoga for physical health.
2. To review the role of yoga in promoting mental health and psychological well-being.
3. To explore the possible physiological and psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of yoga.
4. To identify the role of yoga as a complementary therapy in selected health conditions.
5. To discuss the limitations of existing evidence and implications for future research and healthcare practice.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

This article was prepared as an evidence-based narrative review of published literature related to the therapeutic effects of yoga on physical and mental health.

### Sources of Literature

Relevant literature was identified from scientific databases and recognized health-related sources. The review considered publications related to yoga, complementary therapy, physical health, mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, sleep, chronic disease management, and quality of life.

### Search Strategy

Search terms included combinations of the following keywords:

- Yoga
- Yoga therapy

- Complementary therapy
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sleep quality
- Chronic disease
- Quality of life
- Mind-body intervention

Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to identify relevant literature.

## Inclusion Criteria

### The review considered:

1. Original research studies evaluating yoga interventions.
2. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses.
3. Evidence-based reviews relevant to physical or mental health.
4. Studies involving adult or adolescent populations where applicable.
5. Publications available in English.
6. Studies examining yoga as a complementary or supportive intervention.

## Exclusion Criteria

The following publications were excluded:

1. Studies with insufficient methodological information.
2. Articles not directly related to yoga and health outcomes.
3. Duplicate publications.
4. Publications focused exclusively on philosophical aspects without relevance to therapeutic or health outcomes.

## Data Synthesis

The selected literature was reviewed and findings were organized into major themes:

- Yoga and physical health
- Yoga and stress reduction
- Yoga and anxiety and depression
- Yoga and sleep
- Yoga and chronic disease management
- Possible mechanisms of action
- Clinical and nursing implications

## YOGA AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

- **Flexibility, Muscular Strength, and Physical Functioning:** One of the most widely recognized benefits of yoga is its positive influence on physical fitness and functional capacity. Yoga postures involve stretching, controlled movement, balance, and the maintenance of specific body positions. Regular practice may contribute to improved flexibility, joint mobility, muscular endurance, balance, and body awareness.<sup>11</sup>
- **Cardiovascular Health:** Yoga has been investigated for its potential role in cardiovascular health. Slow breathing, relaxation, meditation, and physical postures may influence autonomic nervous system activity and reduce

stress-related physiological responses. Some studies have reported improvements in blood pressure and cardiovascular risk factors among individuals practicing yoga.<sup>12</sup>

- **Respiratory Function:** Pranayama and other yogic breathing techniques focus on controlled breathing and respiratory awareness. These practices may improve breathing efficiency and respiratory muscle function in some populations. Slow and controlled breathing may also contribute to relaxation and reduced sympathetic nervous system activity.<sup>13</sup>
- **Musculoskeletal Health and Chronic Pain:** Yoga has also been explored as a supportive intervention for musculoskeletal conditions and chronic pain. Gentle stretching, strengthening, relaxation, and improved body awareness may help improve physical functioning and reduce pain-related disability. Chronic pain is often associated with psychological stress, fear of movement, sleep problems, and reduced physical activity. Yoga may address several of these factors simultaneously by combining movement with breathing and relaxation.<sup>14</sup>

## YOGA AND MENTAL HEALTH

- **Yoga and Stress Reduction:** Stress is a natural response to challenging situations; however, chronic or excessive stress can negatively affect both physical and mental health. Yoga combines physical movement, breathing control, relaxation, and mindfulness, which may reduce physiological and psychological stress responses.<sup>15</sup>
- **Yoga and Anxiety:** Anxiety is characterized by excessive worry, fear, restlessness, and physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate and muscle tension. Yoga may help reduce anxiety by promoting relaxation, improving breathing awareness, and reducing excessive physiological arousal. Mindfulness and meditation components of yoga may also help individuals observe thoughts without excessive emotional reactivity. This may contribute to improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety symptoms.<sup>15</sup>
- **Yoga and Depression:** Depression is associated with persistent low mood, loss of interest, reduced energy, disturbed sleep, and impaired functioning. Physical activity and mind-body interventions have been investigated as supportive approaches for improving depressive symptoms. Yoga may contribute to improved mood through physical activity, relaxation, social interaction in group settings, mindfulness, and increased self-efficacy. Breathing and meditation practices may also promote emotional regulation.<sup>14</sup>
- **Yoga and Sleep Quality:** Sleep is essential for physical recovery, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and overall health. Stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and unhealthy lifestyle habits can contribute to poor sleep quality.<sup>14</sup>
- **Yoga and Quality of Life:** Quality of life is influenced by physical health, emotional well-being, independence, social functioning, and the ability to perform daily activities. Chronic illness can negatively affect multiple dimensions of quality of life.<sup>14</sup>

## POSSIBLE MECHANISMS OF ACTION

The therapeutic effects of yoga are likely to result from multiple interconnected physiological and psychological mechanisms.

- **Regulation of the Autonomic Nervous System:** Yoga practices may promote a shift from excessive sympathetic nervous system activity toward increased parasympathetic activity. This may contribute to reduced heart rate, improved relaxation, and decreased physiological stress responses.<sup>13</sup>
- **Improvement in Stress Regulation:** Chronic stress can influence neuroendocrine function and may contribute to multiple physical and psychological health problems. Yoga-based relaxation and breathing practices may reduce perceived stress and improve the body's ability to respond to stressful situations.<sup>12</sup>
- **Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation:** Yoga encourages attention to breathing, movement, and present-moment experiences. This increased awareness may help individuals recognize emotional responses and reduce automatic reactions to stressful thoughts or situations.<sup>15</sup>
- **Physical Activity and Body Awareness:** Yoga provides a structured form of physical activity while also promoting awareness of posture, movement, and bodily sensations. Improved body awareness may support healthier lifestyle choices and encourage long-term engagement in self-care practices.<sup>14</sup>
- **Social and Behavioral Factors:** Group-based yoga programs may provide social interaction, motivation, and a sense of belonging. Regular participation in yoga may also encourage individuals to develop healthier routines related to physical activity, relaxation, and sleep.<sup>15</sup>

## YOGA AS A COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY IN SELECTED HEALTH CONDITIONS

### CARDIOVASCULAR CONDITIONS

Yoga may support cardiovascular health by promoting physical activity, relaxation, and stress reduction. It may also contribute to improvements in selected cardiovascular risk factors. However, individuals with cardiovascular disease should follow medical advice and use yoga as a complementary intervention.

- **Diabetes and Metabolic Health:** Lifestyle modification plays an important role in the prevention and management of metabolic disorders. Yoga may contribute to increased physical activity, stress reduction, and improved health-related behaviors. However, it should be combined with appropriate medical treatment, dietary management, and regular monitoring.<sup>11</sup>
- **Cancer Supportive Care:** Cancer and its treatment may be associated with fatigue, stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and reduced quality of life. Gentle yoga programs have been investigated as supportive interventions for improving psychological well-being and quality of life among cancer survivors and patients.<sup>11</sup>
- **Chronic Pain Conditions:** Yoga may provide a multidimensional approach to chronic pain management by combining gentle physical activity, stretching,

breathing, and relaxation. It may help reduce pain-related fear and improve physical functioning.<sup>14</sup>

However, individualized assessment is essential because certain postures may not be appropriate for all individuals.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this review suggest that yoga has considerable potential as a complementary therapy for promoting both physical and mental health. The multidimensional nature of yoga distinguishes it from interventions that focus exclusively on physical exercise or psychological relaxation. By integrating movement, breathing, meditation, and relaxation, yoga may influence several physiological and psychological pathways simultaneously.<sup>15</sup>

Future research should focus on well-designed randomized controlled trials with adequate sample sizes and standardized reporting of yoga interventions. Long-term follow-up studies are also required to determine whether the benefits of yoga are sustained over time.<sup>15</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING AND HEALTHCARE PRACTICE

Healthcare professionals can play an important role in promoting safe and evidence-informed use of yoga as a complementary therapy.

1. Yoga may be considered as part of health promotion and wellness programs.
2. Nurses can educate individuals about the potential benefits of regular physical activity, relaxation, breathing exercises, and stress management.
3. Yoga interventions should be individualized according to age, physical condition, and health status.
4. Patients with chronic illness should consult appropriate healthcare professionals before beginning a new exercise or yoga program.
5. Yoga should complement, rather than replace, prescribed medical or psychological treatment.
6. Qualified instructors and appropriate supervision are important, particularly for individuals with physical limitations or complex health conditions.
7. Healthcare institutions may consider incorporating yoga-based wellness programs for patients, healthcare professionals, students, and community populations.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

This review has several limitations. It is a narrative evidence-based review and does not include a formal meta-analysis. The included literature represents diverse populations and yoga practices, which limits direct comparison between studies. Publication bias and variations in methodological quality may also influence the interpretation of available evidence.

Additionally, the therapeutic effects of yoga may vary according to the type of practice, frequency, duration, participant motivation, and baseline health status. Therefore, findings should not be generalized to all yoga practices or all populations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Yoga may be promoted as a complementary strategy for improving physical and mental well-being.
2. Healthcare professionals should provide evidence-based guidance regarding the safe practice of yoga.
3. Yoga interventions should be individualized and adapted to the participant's health condition and physical ability.
4. Standardized yoga protocols should be developed for specific health conditions.
5. Future research should include large, multicenter randomized controlled trials.
6. Long-term studies are needed to evaluate the sustainability of yoga-related health benefits.
7. Research should examine the optimal frequency, intensity, duration, and type of yoga for different populations.
8. Integration of yoga-based wellness programs in educational institutions, workplaces, and healthcare settings may be considered.

## CONCLUSION

Yoga is a holistic mind-body practice with significant potential as a complementary therapy for promoting physical and mental health. Available evidence suggests that regular and appropriately guided yoga practice may improve flexibility, balance, physical functioning, stress levels, anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep quality, and overall quality of life.

Further high-quality research is required to establish standardized therapeutic protocols and determine the most effective forms of yoga for specific physical and psychological conditions. Nevertheless, the available evidence supports the inclusion of appropriately designed yoga programs as part of comprehensive approaches to health promotion and disease management.

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