The 3 Best Yoga Poses for Back Pain, According to Science

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Yoga for Back Pain Relief

Yoga is everywhere. From its humble origin in India, it has made its way to different countries around the world where practitioners vouch for its therapeutic effects. In the U.S. alone, as many as 36 million Americans practice yoga. Most users perform various traditional poses (asana) to relieve stress. Yoga is not just about learning complicated poses. Its original form also incorporates breathing (pranayama) and selfless action, making it a deeply spiritual experience.

Today, yoga has grown into something that doesn't just nourish your mind and soul. Doctors are now steering clear of opioid prescriptions and recommending it to treat various illnesses, including back pain

Since yoga involves low-intensity workouts that don't put stress on joints, it has become a popular exercise of choice for back pain sufferers. Whether you're young or old, beginner or advanced practitioner, there are yoga programs tailored to your needs. This guide shows how yoga can help relieve back pain and the different yoga poses you can start with.

Does Yoga Help With Back Pain?

While scientific studies exploring the link between yoga and back pain are limited, all of them provide positive results.

In a 2017 study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, military veterans suffering from chronic low back pain completed a 12-week yoga program with an emphasis on core strengthening. After the program, everyone who tried yoga reported less pain than those who received conventional therapies like exercise, medications and physical therapy.

In another study published in 2009 in the journal *Spine*, it is reported that yoga can help people with chronic low back pain perform daily activities with ease and less pain. Chronic back pain, defined as back pain that lasts more than three months, poses challenges to medical professionals as some cases don't even respond to medications and other traditional treatments.

What Type of Yoga Works Best for Back Pain?

Different types of yoga exist to meet the needs of people with varying medical conditions. In the U.S., hatha yoga is perhaps the most popular. It incorporates three elements in its program to provide healing and relaxation: controlled breathing, classic yoga poses (asanas) and meditation.

Although it's a good stress reliever, the scope of hatha yoga is limited as far as providing relief to low back pain sufferers is concerned. Fortunately, there's a type of hatha yoga that has the right intensity and poses perfect for those suffering from back pain.

Iyengar Yoga Is the Most Helpful

It is known as Iyengar yoga, named after the person who developed it–B.K.S. Iyengar. The Iyengar yoga emphasizes on physical alignment, ensuring that your bones are stacked for optimum support and prevention of muscle fatigue.

To do so, you will need to use assistive devices like belts, benches, blocks and blankets when performing the poses. This way, you can leverage the benefits of the stretches even if you're a beginner with physical limitations. The instructors will also ensure that your body is in proper alignment by meticulously inspecting the position of each of your body part–from the shoulder down to the angle of the toes.

The Research Behind Yoga for Back Pain Relief

To measure how effective Iyengar yoga is compared to traditional therapies, a study was funded by National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. They divided 90 adult participants into two groups: Half of them performed Iyengar yoga for 24 weeks while the other half received standard medical care. Those who were taught and performed Iyengar yoga poses twice a week for 24 weeks reported 42% reduction in pain, 29% reduction in functional disability and 46% reduction in depressive symptoms at the end of the program. They also used fewer pain medications compared to the control group.

A related study, published in the *International Journal of Yoga*, conducted a systematic review of six scientific studies about the link between yoga and back pain. All six studies, involving 570 patients, concluded that Iyengar yoga is an effective method of providing short-term pain relief on people with neck and back pain.

Although the studies have flaws and limitations, they provide evidence that yoga is a noninvasive, non-pharmacologic therapy for back pain that doctors should consider for their patients.

What Are the Best Yoga Poses for Back Pain Relief?

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it has basic Iyengar poses you can easily do at home. If the pose becomes too uncomfortable, stop and either adjust the routine or try something else. Lastly, remember that yoga is intended to complement, not replace, traditional back pain treatments.

Supta Padangusthasana

This pose stretches your hamstrings (thigh muscles) while relieving tension on your lower back:

- With the floor supporting your back, bend your right knee to your chest and then place a belt or strap on the ball of your right foot.
- Straighten your right leg as you pull the belt downward with both hands.
- Move your groins toward the floor to create a small curve with your lower back.
- Then, slowly draw the leg closer to your face by lifting your head up and gripping the strap with both hands. Take slow and deep breaths.
- Hold the position for a few seconds. Repeat on the other leg.

Trikonasana

Its name originated from two Sanskrit words (trikona and asana) which mean "triangle posture". This pose not only stretches your back muscles but also improve bodily functions:

- Stand up and spread your legs about four feet apart.
- Place your right foot at 90 degrees while your left foot at 15 degrees. The right heel should be aligned with the center of the left foot arch. Ensure that your weight is equally distributed over both feet.
- Take a deep breath and as you exhale, bend your body to the right. Touch the ground with your right hand while lifting your left hand up. Both arms should form a straight line.

- If the position is too uncomfortable, rest your right hand on the shin or ankle. Keep your hips straight. Turn your head to the left, directing your gaze upward toward your left palm.
- Stretch fully and take long, deep breaths. Repeat on the other side.

Legs Up the Wall

One of the simplest yoga poses for back pain, the “legs up the wall”, elevates your legs while providing space to your lower back and sitting bones. To boost its effect, you can also place sandbags or additional weights on the soles of your feet:

- Lie on the floor and assume a side-lying position with your knees bent on your chest.
- While maintaining your position, move closer to the wall until your sitting bones come in contact with the wall surface.
- Switch position by lying on your back and straightening your legs and knees up the wall.
- Ensure that your pelvis is touching the floor. Put sandbags or items of similar weight on the soles of your feet to press the pelvis further into the ground.
- Lengthen and release your sacral and lumbar vertebrae. Take slow, deep breaths throughout the routine.

The Takeaway

Yoga can do wonders for your back pain as long as you use the right tools and techniques. Keep in mind to perform yoga a few hours after eating so the food will be fully digested and you have enough energy by the time you start a routine.

Back pain is a complex disorder that may require a combination of medications and alternative approach. Yoga is just a supplement, not the ultimate cure for back pain. Talk to your doctor to learn more about yoga contraindications and the specific poses that will best meet your needs.