

On the Road to Recovery with Yoga

There is a growing body of evidence showing that yoga, as a complementary therapy to conventional treatments, can be of help to those affected by cancer. There are many relevant benefits of practising yoga, for example reducing anxiety, improving sleep and enhancing the quality of life for those living with and beyond cancer and their carers.

At the Breast Clinic, Giles Davies, Director of Surgery, works in partnership with Nicky Dye, an experienced therapeutic yoga specialist, and founder of Claygate Yoga Clinic. Together, they ensure the safety and comfort of cancer patients on an individual basis, so that they can relax in the knowledge that they are safe to practice.

All cancer patients can benefit from yoga, including people experiencing treatment-related symptoms, for example, post-surgical pain with a limited range of motion, sleep issues, fatigue and digestive problems. All surgical incisions need to be healed before attending a yoga class.

Yoga classes can also be beneficial for those feeling isolated and emotionally affected by their cancer diagnosis.

Lymphatic Flow

Yoga practice can help to improve lymphatic flow. This supports the immune system so that you can fight infections and cope with inflammation. It also addresses the risk of swelling associated to lymph node removal (lymphedema)

The lymphatic system in our bodies is made up of a network of vessels and nodes that carry, collect and filter a clear watery fluid called lymph. It drains fluid from tissues back into the bloodstream, filters and lymph and blood and fights infection.

Good lymphatic flow is essential to the correct functioning of our immune system, as it works alongside blood circulation to ensure dead cells, viruses and waste products are removed from bloodstream and nutrients reach all organs.

The lymphatic system does not have its own pump and relies on the individual keeping active, hydrated and eating a varied and balanced diet. Muscle tone, good health and nutrition contribute to the movement of fluid through the network of lymph vessels, nodes and reservoirs. Swelling can sometimes occur after the removal of lymph nodes; it can be really beneficial to practice yoga in order to keep the lymph flowing.

Other benefits of a specialist yoga class for those affected by cancer include:

- Better lung capacity, respiration, and endocrine function
- Improved lymphatic flow which aids healing, circulation and boosts immunity
- Improved quality and quantity of sleep
- Better mobility and joint health
- Restored strength and range of motion
- Enhanced energy through breath awareness and conscious breathing techniques
- Better digestion
- Embodied feeling of safety and groundedness
- Improved quality of life

- Increased well-being
- Enhanced processing of emotions
- Less pain
- Decreased stress, anxiety and depression
- Decreased fatigue, and cognitive impairment or brain fog
- Decreased nausea

The objectives are as follows:

- clear out toxins accrued during treatment more effectively
- stimulate muscles
- increase blood flow
- balance the glands
- enhance the lymphatic flow
- increase the current of oxygen, and blood to cells, delivering vital nutrients to tired cells and further clearing out toxins
- Dissipate tension and anxiety and enable a greater sense of wellbeing
- strengthen the body, enhance good posture, and flexibility in a gentle, balanced manner.
- Greater internal stillness and a sense of unity, creating a feeling of calm

What does a specialist yoga class look like?

Here is a sample class structure

1. Simple breath practice and settling the mind and body, thoughts and physical sensations
2. Easy seated sway, to increase internal body awareness
3. Relaxation for grounding and breath awareness
4. Diaphragmatic breathing exercise
5. Neck, shoulder and arm mobility
6. Side stretches
7. Twists
8. Bridge lifts and other hip opening poses
9. Leg stretch
10. Meditation & Relaxation

When the mind and body is integrated, optimal functioning is resumed. Yoga seeks to join the breath and body, enhancing self awareness and control over thoughts and emotions. The breath is intrinsically linked to the functioning of the nervous system; working with the exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is our “rest, digest & heal” state. By consciously slowing down and deepening the breath, we come out of the sympathetic state, which governs the “fight, flight & survive” mechanism. Deep, slow, mindful inhalations followed by long exhalations serve to encourage movement of the diaphragm, stimulating the flow from the abdomen and thorax. Sound can be used to soothe and integrate the mind and body; this is also very grounding, which is helpful if the individual is feeling anxious or unsettled. Connecting the breath with sound deepens the length of the exhale, which is optimal for lymphatic flow and healing.

Yoga postures and slow sequences are designed to build or maintain healthy muscle tone without causing over-heating of the body, or fatigue. Physical movement is helpful to move energy inside the body and lift the spirits. The co-ordination of breath and

movement leads to greater integration and a felt sense of inner balance. Each pose or family of poses, has specific benefits, such as side-bends to release stress and aid detoxification of the liver, and twists to create compression and space in the abdomen and to ease the upper back.

With regular practice, the principles and benefits of a yoga class for cancer can become part of everyday life by improving the quality, depth and mindfulness of breathing and movement.

Not all yoga classes are suitable for cancer patients and survivors. Some classes are too strenuous; a specialist yoga teacher will have a greater understanding of the benefits, contra-indications and range of motion post-surgery. Even gentle yoga classes can place too much strain on certain parts of the body and should be given special care after surgery or during treatment. Specialist yoga classes for those affected by cancer are not just safe but aim to provide physical and psychological benefits that can range from keeping the joints lubricated (despite the effects of certain drugs) to reducing anxiety. Individuals often comment on how much calmer, balanced and contented they feel after practising yoga.