Complementary Approaches: Yoga, Tai Chi

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Intro and Background

Yoga has been practiced in Asian countries for thousands of years, sometimes to treat a variety of diseases. 1 Generally, yoga can be characterized by breathing, meditation, and posture techniques, though it encompasses different styles and schools of thought. In the United States, Hatha yoga is most common. 2 Tai Chi is a similar form of body manipulation in which slow, graceful movements are combined with breathing techniques. 3

Recently, in Western culture yoga has been suggested to treat ailments such as arthritis 4, asthma 5, coronary artery disease, 6 and epilepsy. 7 Both yoga and Tai Chi can be viewed as aerobic exercises that can decrease the nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and depression associated with many cancer treatments. 8, 9They have also been shown to improve quality of life following treatment.10, 11

Scientific Research

Most of the research pertaining to yoga and cancer study how yoga can help ease side effects of the disease and treatments. Yoga has been shown to improve side effects that trouble cancer patients, like depression, loss of sleep, and physical weakness.12, 13, 14, 15, 16 Yoga can also improve quality of life. 13, 14, 15, 16, 10

Exactly how these therapies combat stress is unknown, though research suggests that the mechanism is intricate and complex. According to one theory, changes in breathing, posture, and muscle tension alter sub-cortical, or unconscious or semi-conscious, patterns.17

Currently, many studies are investigating the benefits of yoga and tai chi on cancer patients and survivors at various institutions.

Visit the National Cancer Institute to learn more about ongoing clinical trials involving yoga.
Visit the National Cancer Institute to learn more about ongoing clinical trials involving tai chi.
To learn more about clinical trials, visit our section on Finding Clinical Trials.

Recommendations

The Society for Integrative Oncology recommends yoga for reducing anxiety and improving mood in breast cancer patients both during and after treatment.18 Gentle yoga may also improve sleep quality.18

Please be sure to see our notice on complementary therapies. To better understand and evaluate the research described above, read our Introduction to Scientific Research.

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