

Yoga for Parkinson's Disease

“The nice surprises garnered in the results were not expected!”

By Sue Qualizza

Study Shows Yoga Helps Parkinson's Disease

When young Dr. Yvonne Searls, PT, PhD, laid in a yoga relaxation pose at The Yoga Studio, bells went off. She had recently completed her doctorate in cell biology while helping her husband cope with fatal cancer. “I thought if this can help reduce the immense stress I am feeling, it must be powerful to those with neurological challenges,” she said.

The loss of this young doctor's husband served as a huge inspiration to help others. In a matter of months, she secured the funds needed to initiate the formal study through her role as assistant professor of physical therapy at Kansas University Medical Center.

Parkinson's disease is a progressively deteriorating neurological illness that eventually robs individuals of their ability to function. “I wanted to investigate how yoga might help slow the progress of the decline in function with the goal of giving someone a better quality of life for longer,” Dr. Searls said.

The objective of the study, since it was a pilot study, was to gather information about physical, physiological and psychological function to see if yoga in the short term (two sessions each week for 12 weeks) positively impacted any of the parameters measured.

These included:

- range of motion
- strength
- posture
- gait
- balance
- depression scales,
- quality of life scales
- fall prevention efficacy scales
- pulmonary function tests
- basic vital signs
- serum immune markers

Data gathered from this study will be used to write a grant for a larger collaborative study with an academic institution in California.

Dr. Searls contacted Suzette Scholtes, founder & director of the accredited yoga school. She knew her work as a teacher with 20 years experience and that she held two masters degrees in the study of yoga with a specialty in therapeutics. Suzette took the proposal to her colleagues who had worked with Parkinson's disease in “medical” classes in India. Key to helping Parkinson's patients is the use of breath practice called pranayama using a series of five to 10 pound sand weights on the arms, wrists, shoulders, femurs and ankles to ease or stop tremors. Scholtes relied upon the yoga known to impact the nervous system while countering fatigue. As well, the yoga movements help flow blood to the brain and the central nervous system.

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By the end of 2006, several of the parameters were measured. "The nice surprises garnered in the results were not expected!" Dr. Searls said. "I think I was most amazed by the visible reduction in tremoring and improvement in the steadiness of gait immediately following the yoga sessions. It was reported to last for hours or the remainder of the day."

"Yoga is the best ally I've found so far in the war against Parkinson's," says Sally Sweeney, one of the first to show up for the study. "Like a good night's sleep, it helps my nervous system work on it's own for awhile."

This spry lady now takes classes two times a week. "It stops my tremor and it loosens my muscles allowing me to stand up straight and lengthen my stride," she says with a smile. "It takes the awful fatigue away and gives me my bounce back."

Dr. Searls remarked this was an awesome assembly of people with Parkinson's disease. She was impressed with their openness, positivism, humor and fellowship they developed as a group. She said it made a huge difference when yoga was individualized to the person or condition. "I do not think we would have seen the same results from a cookie cutter method of yoga instruction," she concluded. "The staff at The Yoga Studio knew what they were doing."

Scholtes said it felt like she was teaching yoga to an aging football team. "Some of these fellows were six feet tall and weigh over 200 pounds," she said. "We had to find the right curriculum to help the petite women and big men at the same time. Thank goodness yoga's universality allows this." She said she had to win the guys over especially when they walked in with negative attitudes. "One of the retired guys walks in and says 'I don't relax easy and I just don't see how this will work!'" A year later, this man, Rex Whitton of Kansas City, has become one of the most active and happy participants.

"Having never practiced Yoga before now I am glad I did," Whitton said. "The KU Med Center trial was a good way to become involved." Whitton says the class (which is ongoing for the group) serves as a support group for Parkinson's patients and a method of practicing Yoga at a level that is consistent with their physical ability.

A Lifesaving Practice: Yoga for Parkinson's

By **Suzanne Barston** on November 5, 2008

Parkinson's Disease (PD) strikes about 60,000 new people every year. According to the National Parkinson's Foundation, this degenerative disease occurs when certain nerve cells (neurons) in a part of the brain called the substantia nigra die or become impaired. These cells are responsible for producing dopamine, the chemical that allows muscles to move smoothly and the body's functions to stay coordinated. When enough of these dopamine-producing nerve cells die, they cause symptoms like tremors, difficulty balancing, and rigidity.

Recently, the Parkinson's community has been taking an interest in yoga as a therapeutic tool for dealing with the effects of the disease. An article on New Jersey news website [Packet Online](#) mentions several studies that have supported the beneficial link between yoga and PD, including research from a pilot program at Weill Cornell Medical Center that showed increased energy, improved sleep, and reduced stress and stiffness in participants. And Yoga Journal cites a 2002 study from the John F. Kennedy Institute in Denmark that "recorded a 65 percent short-term increase in dopamine levels during restorative yoga and meditation in the test group".

While all exercise is encouraged for those with PD, yoga has special benefits, the least of which is an emphasis on building flexibility, balance and strength. Consider some of the specific problems caused by PD:

- 1. Stiffness in the torso and trunk** – According to author and Parkinson's patient Peggy van Hulsteyn in her article for [Yoga Journal](#), this is "one of the most debilitating symptoms of PD because it hampers a person's ability to walk across a room or simply stand upright". There are many asanas that counteract this immobility, helping PD patients avoid the halting, shuffling gait so common with the disease.
- 2. Loss of motor control** – Since a lack of dopamine means less awareness of how your body moves in space, yoga's emphasis on the mind-body connection may help Parkinson's patients hone new skills to make up for that loss.

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3. Breathing and vocal problems – Many people with PD find that their breathing “stiffens” and their voices get quieter as the disease progresses. Using deep, full, restorative breaths, yoga can strengthen and tone the muscles involved in speaking, inhaling and exhaling.

4. Self-confidence – Some of the more obvious and awkward symptoms of PD can make patients hesitant to join group classes, where tremors or jerky movements might be misunderstood. Hence the beauty of yoga classes specifically designed for those with Parkinson’s. Says the wife of one participant in the New Jersey class featured in *Packet Online*, “We’re all in the same boat. That’s therapeutic, too. It gives us strength, like things are going to be OK...The greatest thing is, it calms him and helps him realize what he’s capable of and respecting his limitations.”

Unfortunately, no cure has been found for Parkinson’s, despite the significant number of people affected (around 1.5 million people in the United States alone). Alternative treatments can help alleviate symptoms, but for most people with PD, medications are needed to maintain quality of life. Still, yoga is a great complementary therapy, and one that is being recognized by more and more physicians and advocacy groups. In fact, the National Parkinson’s Foundation has funded community yoga programs as well as research studies to examine the physical and emotional effects of yoga on the disease.

While we wait for scientific proof of how much yoga can help those with Parkinson’s or other degenerative diseases, there are plenty of real-life, human examples of its efficacy. As van Hulsteyn tells *Yoga Journal*, “While I’m gliding through the postures, I sometimes forget, if only for a few brief moments, that I have Parkinson’s. Unlike the rest of the day, when my mind often races ahead to the next task at hand, I can relax and be fully present in the forest of my meditation. And for that magic span of time, as I move normally, I simply feel like myself.”