Practicing Yoga for Rheumatoid Arthritis Pain

by ANGELA FINLAY

Yoga for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Aching, swollen joints can keep you out of the gym and off the trails, but they don't have to keep you from getting a good workout. The stretching, strengthening, and gentle movement of yoga can help increase your flexibility and range of motion without taxing your joints, which makes it a perfect choice for rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients.

The right sort of exercise is just as important as the amount of exercise you get, which means you should take a bit of time exploring all the variations that yoga has to offer before jumping into a yoga routine.

The Benefits of Yoga for Rheumatoid Arthritis

You've probably heard that yoga can help you get in shape, but it goes further than that. In fact, the movements, breathing, and diversity of yoga routines can help your mind and body cope better with RA in several different ways.

Improves Flexibility and Range of Motion

There is no doubt that yoga opens up the joints, encourages flexibility, and gently improves range of motion – with time and patience. RA patients absolutely need to monitor and maintain their joint health, but slow progress is the safest progress. Yoga is based on low impact movements that are practiced at each individual's pace and fitness level; the focus is on small gains rather than competition.

Another wonderful aspect of yoga is the flexibility of the routine itself. If your ankles or hips are bothering you, you can adjust or eliminate certain weight-bearing poses to avoid discomfort. If your wrists are sore, your routine can focus on standing postures, and ignore poses like downward dog that may strain your arms and hands.

Boosts Mood and Reduces Anxiety

Yoga has long been praised for its ability to reduce stress, calm anxiety, and improve mood. Each practice promotes respect for your body's abilities and limitations, feeding your confidence and building better self-esteem. Since RA can attack you emotionally as well as physically, the psychological benefits of yoga can make a big impact on your quality of life.

The breathing techniques and careful postures of yoga keep you in the moment, and that can have a profound effect on your ability to calm yourself. Like biofeedback or cognitive behavioral therapy, yoga not only connects the mind and body, but teaches you how to mentally alter your physical state – namely, muscle tension and stress response.

Offers Interest and Variety

One big barrier to maintaining an exercise routine is boredom. Jogging, biking, or swimming laps are undoubtedly good for you, but they are also repetitive and can be monotonous. This is where yoga diverges from the pack: different yoga styles, sequences of poses, atmospheres, and instructors will always keep things interesting, so it can feel like a whole new activity every time you practice. Moreover, switching up movements and pace will challenge your muscles to adapt, which can get you fitter, faster.

There are many types of yoga, and many places you can practice. If you prefer to roll out your mat in the comfort of your own home, get a few classes under your belt so you understand the basic movements, then opt for a video that clearly guides you through the poses. Do you work better with the motivation and energy of a group? Check out a class at a local gym, community center, or yoga studio. There are even classes held in candlelight, to support a relaxing, soothing atmosphere.

The Best Types of Yoga for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Yoga routines can range from stationary and mellow to flowing and powerful. Not every type will suit a body with joint problems, and depending on your specific points of discomfort, you may have to scale back your routine soon after you start it up. However, these types of yoga tend to bring a comfortable balance of stretching and strengthening without straining your sore joints:

Hatha Yoga

Rules, regulations and competition have no place in a Hatha yoga routine, where gentle postures are taken from a range of yoga styles and compiled in sequences designed to align your muscles, skin, and bones. The poses don’t flow into each other; instead they are slow and static, and an emphasis is placed on stretching and learning to breathe into the stretches.

Hatha is the best place to begin a yoga practice, but it’s also a great way for more seasoned yogis to stay limber and relaxed.

Iyengar Yoga

This is actually a type of Hatha yoga, but puts a bit more emphasis on precision and breath. The movements are slow and stable, and the poses will often involve yoga props to maintain proper alignment, like foam or cork blocks, belts, and blankets. These tools will help you reap the rewards no matter how flexible or strong different areas of your body happen to be, which makes it especially appealing for those who are limited in their range of motion.

Vinyasa

If Hatha is a bit too meditative for you, you may want to step up the activity level with a Vinyasa class. The core idea of Vinyasa is connection. The poses flow into each other, and each transition will take place on an inhalation or exhalation.

It can take a bit of practice to match your breath with the flow of movement, but Vinyasa doesn’t have to be hard on your body – simple sequences can be done with all limbs on the mat for strong support. Lots of people appreciate the diversity of Vinyasa.

Types of Yoga to Avoid for Rheumatoid Arthritis

The worst types of yoga for RA are easy to spot: high-intensity movements combined with weight bearing poses and a fast pace spell trouble for those with joint issues. Certain forms of Vinyasa fall into this category, including Ashtanga yoga and what are known as Power yoga.

Bikram yoga uses heat to intensify the routine of 26 postures, practiced in the same sequence every time. While

heat can help you open up your joints and soothe your inflammation, Bikram yoga can be very physically demanding.

If you'd like to try out hot yoga, consider a Moksha yoga class: this is a chain of yoga studios in North America that use heated rooms, but include a variety of gentle Hatha and Vinyasa classes in their schedule for all abilities.

Precautions to Keep in Mind Before You Start Yoga

Before you start any new exercise, you'll need to talk to your doctor about any physical limitations you might have. For instance, if particular joints are giving you trouble, your doctor or rheumatologist may have some specific advice to ease the pressure and protect them from further damage.

Working with a reputable yoga instructor who has experience with arthritis patients is best. A comfortable and responsive environment is important, and a good teacher will help you to adjust your postures and stay motivated.

Most importantly, always remember that pain does not point to gain – if anything starts to hurt, scale back your exercise or take a break for the day, a week, or until your RA flare-up is over.