

How Yoga is Changing the Face of Aging

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“I want to touch my toes...I’ve never been able to touch my toes.” This is how my conversation began with a man who was to later become a personal training client and regular member of my yoga class. In many ways, he fits the profile of today’s 60+ population. He is fit...still skis 75 days a year or more, runs 5k races, completes triathlons and in the summer months, he travels to exotic places with a high-school buddy and cycles from sunrise until sunset. After cycling all day, each of them sets up a tent somewhere and catches a decent night’s rest. They get up the next day and continue on the 1,000-mile or so journey. This goes on for weeks at a time. When I first met Jim, he was well-muscled, stiff as a board and the range of motion in most of his joints was limited. He could run and do all of his other events and had a surprisingly uninjured history given his range of motion. He had now decided that it was time to work some flexibility into his workout routine.

As a personal trainer and yoga instructor, I regularly meet with people in this age category and each time, I think this is not your “average” senior citizen. I find that I think this more and more often, which is saying to me that maybe I should be altering my view of what to expect from today’s senior. The fabled baby-boomer generation has completely redefined what it means to be over 60 and retired. Rather than considering retirement “being put out to pasture,” this generation embraces the freedom that comes along with no longer being tied to the office.¹ More of these folks are trying mind-body exercise such as yoga in an effort to retain physical fitness without the impact of running or step classes. As a yoga instructor, I have heard and witnessed many amazing stories of the benefits of physical activity and practicing yoga for all ages. As a student of yoga

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and of exercise science, I have lately been wondering if mainstream scientific research could provide me with some solid support for what I have been observing in my classroom.

In 1998 a survey was conducted in the US that, for the first time, documented the prevalence of yoga in this country. The results of the study were published in 2004 in the peer-reviewed journal *Alternative Therapies*.² The researchers found that “64% of yoga users reported using yoga for wellness, 48% for health conditions, 21% specifically for back or neck pain. Ninety percent felt yoga was very or somewhat helpful.”² Additionally, the researchers found that 54.4% of the survey responders who were practicing yoga at the time of the survey were between 34-53...the “baby-boomer” generation.

This generation is not simply aging, they are challenging and changing many commonly held beliefs about what it means to age. They have transformed the terms “senior citizen,” “geriatric” and “aged” into the much more chic “Third Age.”¹ As a group, they are more physically active and are “younger” than their counterparts of just 40 years ago and many are practicing yoga as part of a preventative health strategy.

So, what is it about yoga that has made it so popular with this age group? Yoga is currently recommended by The Arthritis Foundation³ and has been found to relieve symptoms of osteoarthritis of the knee⁴ common condition among this age group.

Participants in an 8-week study conducted at the American College of Rheumatology in

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Philadelphia Pennsylvania in 2005 “had statistically significant improvements in their levels of pain and disability...pain declined 46.7%.”⁴ This study was conducted on a small group of participants (11) and was a pilot study that made recommendations for future studies. The American College of Rheumatology recommends non-pharmaceutical treatments for the pain of osteoarthritis.⁴ This study demonstrates that the use of yoga may be a viable alternative to drug therapy.

Paradoxically, this age group is both more and less physically active than previous generations who reached their seventh decade of life. While many continue to actively pursue leisure activities such as golf, walking and cycling, it seems that nearly as many are suffering from complications associated with obesity (i.e., insulin resistance) and cardiovascular disease.⁵ Between 1970 and 2004 numerous studies were conducted that investigated the effects of practicing yoga on these health issues. In 2005, Innes et.al. reviewed these studies and collated the results in an article published that year in the Journal of the Board of American Family Medicine.⁶ They reviewed a total of 70 studies, a majority of which were conducted in India.⁶ “Of the 13 studies evaluating the effects of yoga on markers of insulin resistance, most documented significant, post-intervention improvement in one or more indices following the practice of yoga either alone or in combination with other therapies.”⁶ One study conducted specifically on “American seniors demonstrated a substantial (19%) reduction in fasting insulin.”⁷ The literature review also found, “significant positive changes in blood lipid levels following yoga-based interventions.”⁶ Even more encouraging, “In a group of generally healthy American seniors, those completing a 12-month comprehensive yoga-based

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program demonstrated a decline in...an indicator of atherosclerosis...suggesting a direct relation between the practice of this program and atherosclerotic change.”⁶ Yoga represents an exciting and accessible alternative tool for maintaining health and combating diseases associated with the aging process.

Perhaps the most widely discussed change in our “regular” habits as we age is the change in our sleep patterns. There are a variety of theories as to why this occurs, but most of us are not as concerned with the “why” as we are with how to fix it. Could yoga assist with this, too? Manjunath and Telles found that yes, yoga could help with this problem.

Studying 120 residents of a home for the aged in Bangalore city, India, revealed that practicing yoga allowed participants to decrease the time it took them to fall asleep, increased the total number of hours they slept and improved their feeling of being well-rested. These results were evident in the yoga group and not in the comparison groups which used either ayurvedic preparations or made no change to their routine.⁸

Yoga is gaining popularity throughout the United States and with varying age groups. As the demographics change and focus moves towards those who are over 60, yoga is “going mainstream” and is being recommended more widely for disease prevention and health maintenance. Various organizations are now posting information on their websites about yoga practice and what its benefits are, including the American Association of Retired People (AARP)⁹, The Arthritis Foundation³ and The American Cancer Society¹⁰.

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As I enter my yoga class each week, I observe the power of the practice and the changes people are able to make in their activities of daily living. As a student of yoga and of exercise science it is fortifying to review the research and find support for my observations. The research also lends a voice of credibility and de-mystifies yoga for many who are new to the practice. When we can make yoga more accessible and “real” for people we increase our opportunity to reach, inspire and motivate them on their path to health.

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