Can Practicing Yoga Offer Fibromyalgia Pain Relief?

by STARLA RICH

Yoga for Fibromyalgia Relief

Do you ever feel like the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz" after a lengthy rainstorm? I know I do many mornings when I first wake up and throughout painful flare-ups! My joints are squeaky, muscles achy, mobility stiff and painful. This is why yoga for fibromyalgia patients can be beneficial.

Proper sleep and a balanced diet void of the various fibro triggers, as well as certain herbal supplements can be like “oil” to loosen me up a bit.

Beyond these methods, doctors strongly advocate a consistent exercise routine — something that is one of the last things you feel like doing due to the chronic pain and fatigue fibromyalgia brings. Still, from a physical standpoint, exercise is a necessary part of the regimen if you expect to find relief from the pain, stiffness and fatigue brings.

These standard methods of combating the conditions associated with fibromyalgia only address a small portion of the equation, because the truth is, fibromyalgia does not just affect you physically: it takes a toll on you mentally, emotionally and socially.

Yoga as a Fibromyalgia Treatment Option

This begs the question, is there anything out there that can truly integrate all the suggested methods of treatment and maintenance so there is significant improvement and successful lifestyle changes for the body, mind and soul? Some researchers think so.

One of the more recently researched alternative treatments is yoga. It can be a good, gentle way to stretch your body and loosen up tight muscles and joints, while also helping with balance and strength. As you become more advanced, it can provide you with a cardiovascular workout as well.

Some people treat yoga just as exercise, but when emphasizing controlled breathing and awareness it also can help you relax, calm and focus your mind, and deal with emotional turmoil.

Exercise is a difficult thing when you have this illness. Too much exercise can cause symptom flares ranging from mild to massive. Be sure to talk to your doctor and learn how to start an exercise program before you begin a yoga regimen or any other activity.

Can Yoga Actually Help?

No matter how much you fear exercise and movement due to pain, I think you will agree it is better than the alternative: if we stand still we will rust and become completely immobile and only worsen over time!

The good news is fibromyalgia and yoga is a great combination. Yoga's careful strengthening and relaxation

techniques will help get your body moving, as well as helping to improve your mind, body, sleep and more.

Yoga differs from traditional exercise in that it is a whole-body experience using mind and body targeting of trigger points while developing healthier thoughts and mindset.

Yoga Do's and Don’ts

Practice yoga on an empty stomach (at least two hours after eating) to avoid fibromyalgia nausea. Popular times to practice yoga are at sunrise or sunset and before bedtime.

If you are like me and many others in this fibro journey, mornings can be the worst part of the day because of morning stiffness. If you do desire to integrate yoga into your early morning routine, there are a few things you can do to prepare for a pleasant experience.

Take a warm bath, put on warm exercise clothing, and layer clothing to adjust with varying temperatures. Anything you can do to make your environment and experience more balanced is of benefit.

You may find productive for fibromyalgia and yoga is right before your evening meal, around four or five o'clock. Or, to really help you achieve a deeper sleep, practice right before bedtime. Just be gentle as too much activity at night can hinder sleep.

Develop a consistent yoga workout. Five or 10 minutes a day will be more beneficial for you than doing 20 minutes every other day, or 60 minutes once a week. Make it a part of your daily routine and don’t allow anything to deter that.

Other Considerations

Consider it part of your morning ritual even if you vary in the degree of impact based on your level of pain. Increase yoga practice time as you are able.

Find something pleasant to focus on while you're practicing yoga: a favorite picture on the wall, a decorative focal point or a window — anything that invokes positive thoughts.

Don’t practice yoga in your normal “work” environment where you might be looking into your kitchen thinking about cooking breakfast, or near your laundry area where there are clothes to be folded. Your place should be a quiet peaceful place with no distractions. Yoga’s full benefit is the ability to concentrate on what you are experiencing in your body as well as your mind.

Your thoughts need to be clear during yoga practice. Below are some of the things you should be concentrating on:

- **Your breathing.** Take long, deep complete breaths through your nose.
- **Focusing on one spot.** Stare at a spot directly in front of you, or whichever direction your head is pointing for the posture.
- **Your body’s alignment.** Be aware of what your body is doing. Is it balanced, equal on each side? Are you using the proper form for the pose?
- **Sensations in your body.** Are your muscles tighter on one side than the other? Are you feeling a good, comfortable stretch or are you pulling on your muscles too much?
- **Tightened stomach and Kegel muscles.** This is a little harder to accomplish but well worth the effort. You may only be able to hold these for a second of each pose at the beginning but keep trying to hold them longer.

Begin your yoga practice with warm-ups and end with relaxation for best results.

Safety Measures

- **Don’t compress either the lower back or the neck into a backward bending position.** If you have neck or back problems this will help avoid injury.
- **Don't lock your knees when bending forward in either a standing or sitting position.** This will help prevent pulling on your lower back.
- **Cushion your knees with a pillow under them if kneeling on them hurts.** You can also put a pillow under your bottom, and over or between your feet when kneeling to take some stress off the knees.
- **Be aware of poses and your health.** If you have high blood pressure, sinus problems or are menstruating, do not practice upside-down postures.
- **Never force anything or push until you feel discomfort.** If a posture is hurting you, ease up or stop. The one exception to this may be foot pain as the feet are often weak and tight. Keep trying to work them if possible.

Listen to your body and go with what it will be able to do — it will let you know what you can and can’t do from day to day. If you have a day where you are unable to do any of the yoga exercises due to pain or a flare-up, it would be of benefit to still find a quiet place to sit and clear your thoughts and exercise your mind as you prepare for your day.

While yoga may not be for everyone, studies indicate it brings benefits to many fibro sufferers. Talk to your doctor, seek out certified yoga instructors in your community, research what suits your personal needs, and seek guidance from friends who may participate in the practice.

Be gentle, patient and forgiving along the way and remember this applies to ALL of you — body, mind, and soul. Keep moving forward as you can, move in place when you must, but keep moving! Oil those hinges!