

Beginners' Yoga Common Special Needs

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July 24, 2007

With supervision by an experienced teacher, yoga asana can be modified to accommodate almost any level or condition and any associated risks are far outweighed by the enormous benefits. Yoga works the respiratory, circulatory, endocrine and digestive systems, eradicates toxins and balances the nervous system and the brain. It strengthens the musculature, the bones, and the immune system. It is not only preventative, but curative as well, complimenting western medicine and helping to eliminate side effects. In short, it is a holistic system for perfect health and equilibrium.

A beginner's yoga class may have a variety of people attending, many with special needs to address. It is very important for a yoga teacher to stress self-awareness and authority for students. Beginners in particular will tend to do whatever the teacher directs, regardless of how it feels. They need to be taught first to pay attention to the messages from their bodies, and to heed any signals of distress. Any pose or activity should be stopped at the first sign of pain, faint, dizziness, nausea, or undue fatigue. It is a fine art to find your edge without going over, and then breathe into it, allowing it to soften. All poses should be done gently and very carefully and the students need permission to be guided by their comfort, even if it goes against the teacher's direction at the time.

In neck injuries, especially whiplash, special care should be taken to maintain length when back bending (keep the chin tucked at first). Poses that put weight on the shoulder/neck region should be avoided if they cause any discomfort.

With seniors, there are increased risks in many areas, particularly with the increased brittleness of the bones and structural tendons and ligaments. Yoga should be gentle, slow and easy and all poses supported to allow for proper alignment, control and to avoid potential falls.

Back pain should be first diagnosed by a medical doctor. Herniated discs and other disc problems must first heal before undertaking a yoga class. The direction of bending to avoid depends upon the specific injury or condition. In most cases, extra care should be taken to protect the lumbar spine from overarching, and in all cases, to create length in the spine.

Yoga can be therapeutic for high blood pressure, but the poses need to be worked on gradually. Inversions, in particular, should be avoided until preparatory work has been done. For low blood pressure ensure that they stop at the first sign of dizziness and come out of the poses slowly.

Pregnancy has many special issues including the two immediately above. Most women welcome the increase in flexibility that comes with pregnancy hormones, but particular attention should be paid to ensure proper alignment in order to protect the joints and ligaments that secure the structural integrity of the body. In the first trimester of pregnancy, most asana can still be performed. The exception would be abdominal and lumbar asana (as well as sit-ups and leg lifts). As the abdomen enlarges, the woman's centre of gravity changes, and extra caution should be taken to avoid falls. The fetus should never be compressed or pressured, and so no poses should be done lying face down. Many of these could be modified to standing upright with the support of a wall. As the fetus grows in size, its weight can compromise a major artery when the woman is lying on her back, and so these poses should not be done if they cause any discomfort, especially in the last trimester. Even sitting upright becomes very strenuous and should not be done unsupported for long periods of time. The diaphragm also becomes compressed and so side stretches will help open the intercostals to allow for easy breathing and any pranayama should be gentle and easy. Meditation and Savasana are especially important to allow for relaxation, rejuvenation and regeneration of both the body and the mind.

Particularly helpful asana during pregnancy include supported versions of the following: Adho Muka Svanasana (hands raised on a chair or ledge); Uttanasana (keeping the knees bent and the legs slightly apart); Baddha Konasana and Upavista Konasana (both with buttocks raised on a block and/or back up against a wall); and Savasana (lying on the side with head supported, support between the knees and also between the feet to maintain width in the sacroiliac joint).