

PHYSICIAN LOREN FISHMAN still recalls clearly the day 30 years ago when he found his calling. Not yet a doctor, he knew that he wanted somehow to help people in pain. He was contemplating going to medical school but had chosen first to spend a year studying yoga with B.K.S. Iyengar in Pune, India. "One day," Fishman says, "Mr. Iyengar suddenly asked me, 'You want to go teach my yoga?' It caught me off guard, but I thought, 'If he says I can teach it, I guess I can teach it!'"

Today Fishman is a noted specialist in back pain with a rehabilitation clinic in New York City. But he still teaches at least one yoga class a week for his patients. And he recommends yoga to many patients with back pain, through both his practice and his books, the latest of which is *Relief Is in the Stretch: End Back Pain Through Yoga*.

Most importantly, after many years of feeling isolated from his fellow doctors by his focus on yoga, Fishman now finds himself sought out by them. "Using yoga to treat back pain is increasingly respected by mainstream experts," Fishman says. "I hear from more and more of my colleagues that they are adding yoga to the therapies they recommend."

For a long time, doctors were reluctant to endorse yoga because they felt there wasn't solid science showing it worked. Some studies *have* been done over the years, but most were carried out in India or Europe and didn't turn up in major American medical journals. That changed last December with the publication in the respected *Annals of Internal Medicine* of a randomized, controlled clinical



Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I) lengthens your spine, easing pressure on your vertebrae.

Spine Savers

Back bothering you? Join the club.
Better yet, try these poses.

trial—the most definitive form of scientific evidence—that showed quite clearly that yoga helps those with low back pain: Not only did yoga work, but it worked so well that it surpassed even traditional physical therapy exercises.

Researcher Karen Sherman and her colleagues at the Group Health Cooperative in Seattle took 101 adults suffering from chronic low back pain

better your back

The poses listed here are based on suggestions from physicians Loren Fishman and Mary Pullig Schatz and Viniyoga expert Gary Kraft-

sow. While each pose is generally helpful for the type of back trouble noted, you need to pay close attention to how your body responds when you do it. Back pain varies a lot, so you may need to modify the poses. (If you're new to yoga and need more instruction on pose basics, check out yogajournal.com/poses/.)

Any time you have acute or longstanding pain, see a doctor for a diagnosis before you start yoga. That will help you and your teacher choose the right poses.

Notice how you feel afterward, too: if you frequently find yourself sorer after practice than before, check in with an experienced teacher for some guidance.

To lengthen the spine and reduce joint compression

Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I)

BENEFITS Stretches and aligns the spine by correcting asymmetry

TIP Roll the shoulders back as you start the pose, then concentrate on moving your shoulders in front of your hips while lifting the rib cage away from the pelvis, bracing your lower abdominals.

Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose)

BENEFITS Strengthens the hamstrings, inner thighs, and the muscles stabilizing the spine.

TIP Keep knees straight; use a wall for balance; concentrate on keeping your body in one flat plane and evening out asymmetries.

For posture-related muscle soreness

Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

BENEFITS Strengthens shoulder and back muscles to hold joints and spine in alignment.

TIP Push up on your tiptoes and rotate your arms inward for a deeper upper back stretch.

Bharadvajasana I (Bharadvaja's Twist)

BENEFITS Best gentle stretch for the spine and hips.

TIP Place a folded blanket under the side of your hip to help posture and alignment. Concentrate on bringing the shoulders back as the top of your chest moves forward and up.

To extend the spine and help herniated disks and pinched nerves

Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose)

BENEFITS Opens lumbar and thoracic joints and decreases pressure on the spine by stretching the abdomen and front chest.

TIP To get the fullest stretch, pretend you're trying to look backward over your own head as if you were trying to see your heels.

Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose)

BENEFITS Lengthens the spine to clear space for the nerves exiting the spinal cord.

TIP When you revolve your torso upward, concentrate on pressing the pelvis back and opening the opposite groin.

To fully stretch the spine

Paschimottasana (Seated Forward Bend)

BENEFITS Increases the flexibility of both the lumbar spine and the hamstring muscles.

TIP Use a strap around the soles of your feet and keep your back straight to increase the fullness of the forward bend.

Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero Pose)

BENEFITS Stretches hip joint flexors and increases flexibility in the lower spine.

TIP Modify by placing a folded blanket between your shins. Keep your knees as close together as possible and straighten your spine fully before beginning to lean back (if you can't go all the way, just go far enough to put your hands on the floor behind you.)

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)

BENEFITS Strengthens the entire back, increases range of motion, and opens chest.

TIP Your safest bet is to do a supported version of this pose, using your hands to lift and hold your pelvis up. M.H.

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and randomly assigned them into three groups. One group attended weekly yoga classes for 12 weeks, following a therapeutic routine developed specifically for lower back pain by Vinyoga experts Gary Kraftsow and Robin Rothenberg. The participants were also expected to practice the poses at home every day.

The second group attended a program of stretching and strengthening exercises developed by a physical therapist, also once a week with daily home practice. The third group received a self-care book that included some stretches and relaxation exercises.

It turned out that the yoga participants had less pain and were better able to go about their daily activities than people in either of the comparison groups. Follow-up revealed that after three months, the

"No matter what type of back pain you have, there are poses appropriate for that type of pain."

yoga practitioners continued to have less pain and better function, and they needed fewer pain medications.

This certainly echoes my own experience. Chronic back pain that was keeping me from working more than a few hours a day sent me to my first yoga class, aching for relief. And I discovered that certain poses—Marjaryasana (Cat Pose) at the beginning of the day, Supta Baddha Kona-sana (Reclining Bound Angle Pose) at the end—make a huge difference.

Yoga's effectiveness stems in part from the body awareness it promotes. "You learn to pay attention to what your spine is doing," says Sherman.

And then there is yoga's, well, flexibility. "There are multiple kinds of back pain," says Kraftsow, who's based in Santa Monica, California, and is the author of *Yoga for Transformation*. "What's ideal about yoga is that you can offer different remedies for different conditions."

Adds Mary Pullig Schatz, a physician and Iyengar Yoga practitioner in Nashville, Tennessee, and the author of *Back Care Basics*, "Practicing yoga gives you a more acute sense of body awareness, which

gives your body a chance to move and respond in new ways." Indeed, many of the study participants—most of whom had had little or no previous yoga experience—chose to continue practicing after the study ended.

Of course, none of this would surprise yoga teachers and therapists, who see yoga benefiting people with back pain every day. "Yoga is about seeing the patterns in the body and how to bring them into balance and stability," says Janice Gates, a yoga therapist and the founding director of Yoga Garden Studio in San Anselmo, California. "You figure out where things are tight and where things are loose and how to even them out."

What's tricky, though, is that what provides heaven-sent relief to one person might do little—or even make things worse—for another.

That's because the different types of back pain often have very different causes.

"No matter what type of back pain you have, there are poses appropriate for that type of pain," says Fishman. "But not all back pain is the same, and yoga can work in different ways depending on what's going on with your body." (See "Better Your Back," facing page, for specific postures to try.)

Take me, for instance. I have a wacky spine, flattened and fused in one area, overly mobile in another, which means that when I do certain poses, the mobile part is all that bends, and the pain in the rest of my back never goes away. My teachers have taught me how to modify poses to keep my lower spine rigid and focus the flexing and extension in my upper spine, where I need it.

If you don't do this kind of fine-tuning, says Gates, "you can end up deepening the grooves rather than making new movement patterns." So don't be afraid to tailor your practice to what works for you.

And who knows? You might love what you're doing so much that it becomes a brand-new calling. ■

Melanie Haiken has written for Alternative Medicine and Health.



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