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Yoga for Seniors — Older Clients of Various Fitness Levels Can Enjoy Its Benefits
By Jennifer Van Pelt, MA
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Author's Note: *This article is the second in a series on the health advantages of yoga. I'll discuss how yoga can be a great exercise for seniors, and, in the final installment, how it can promote weight loss and overall health.*

Adults aged 65 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the American population. By 2030, there will be an estimated 72 million adults over the age of 65—that's nearly 20% of the total population.¹ Today's seniors are more active and more interested in exercising to stay fit ever before and many of them are practicing yoga. While the media often portray yoga as an exercise for the thin, the flexible, the athletic, and the young, almost anyone can practice including seniors of any age and fitness level.

Clinical studies have reported that yoga adapted for seniors can significantly improve overall physical fitness in frail elders,² sleep quality and mental health status,³ posture and mobility and balance.⁵ Yoga has been shown to positively benefit seniors with dementia in long-term facilities⁶ and decrease the fear of falling and fall risk in those living in retirement communities.

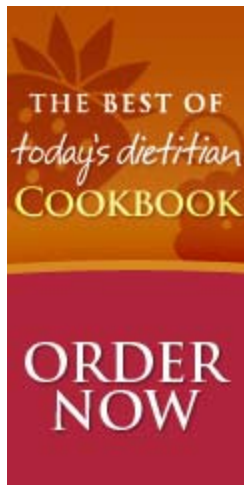
Senior clients are likely to range from the very frail to the very fit, and recommendations integrating yoga into a health and wellness program will depend not only on their individual fitness level but also on the medical conditions they might have. In 2007 to 2008, 58% of women and 53% of men had high blood pressure; 55% of women and 42% of men had arthritis; women and 38% of men had heart disease; 21% of women and 24% of men had cancer; women and men had chronic bronchitis or emphysema; and 9% of women and men had experienced a stroke.¹ Additionally, in 2007, 42% of seniors had functional limitations in their daily living.¹

Special Training Required

However, yoga poses can be adapted to benefit any senior, no matter what their health status. If your elder clients like to attend fitness classes, many gyms and senior centers offer yoga instruction designed for them, including SilverSneakers YogaStretch, Silver Age Yoga, and YogaFit Seniors. Class instructors have undergone special training to teach and modify yoga for seniors, including those with movement limitations. Yoga poses are facilitated through the use of chairs and other props. More active seniors who can easily get down on the floor and up are offered a floor mat.

For other types of senior yoga classes outside of these branded programs, the training, experience, and attitude of the instructor is critical to ensure their safety. Of utmost importance is the instructor's ability to create and maintain a physically and mentally safe environment for senior students.⁷ This is especially the case if seniors are integrated into classes with younger participants and others who have differing abilities.





It's common for yoga instructors to encourage students to "push themselves" into poses. This attitude is likely to create stress for senior participants and increase the risk of injury. In classes where hands-on adjustments are common, an instructor without training in senior care can inadvertently injure older students by moving their bodies into a pose. These injuries can be as severe as a broken bone for those with osteoporosis. In addition, many yoga instructors do not have CPR/automated external defibrillator (AED) training, especially if they teach at a yoga studio. (Generally, instructors at a gym are required to have this training.) Because a large percentage of older adults may have heart disease and/or high blood pressure as well as respiratory issues, CPR/AED training is essential for a senior yoga instructor. So encourage clients to ask specifically whether the class instructor has this training and experience to teach older students.

Suggestions for Elder Clients

Here are some practical tips for advising older clients about adding yoga to their exercise program:

- **Look for classes specifically designed for seniors** or chair yoga classes designed for participants with movement limitations.
- **Don't assume that a class called "gentle" or "beginning" yoga is appropriate for older clients with medical conditions.** Often, these types of classes are geared toward participants with a high level of fitness who are simply unfamiliar with yoga. While the class may move at a slower pace, the poses may be challenging and unsafe for older students. However, gentle or beginner yoga classes for participants of any age may be appropriate for active seniors without major health issues or those who've been practicing yoga for several years and consider themselves experienced yogis or yoginis.
- **Avoid yoga poses that may be unsafe or may aggravate a medical condition.** Forward bends and other poses that place the head below the heart are generally contraindicated for seniors with high blood pressure, glaucoma, retinal conditions, or vertigo.
- **Ask the instructor how to modify a pose if it's uncomfortable or unsteady.** Trained yoga instructors should gladly explain what modifications can be made and know how to use props to assist seniors with poses.
- **Suggest clients use DVDs designed for seniors when they practice yoga at home.** Recommend they preview the DVD before doing the poses to ensure they can perform them at home without an instructor's guidance.

— Jennifer Van Pelt, MA, is a group fitness instructor and healthcare research analyst/consultant in the Reading, Pennsylvania, area. She's trained in SilverSneakers YogaStretch and Yoga for Seniors.

Yoga Info on the Web

For more information about senior yoga, class locations, and instructor certification, visit the following websites:

- www.silverageyoga.org
- www.silversneakers.com
- www.yoga4seniors.com
- www.yogafit.com/news/yoga-for-seniors.html

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