

Components of a Yoga Class

Asanas –

Asanas are a series of poses designed to bring about greater health and well being. The poses are combined in a predictable sequence that addresses strength, flexibility, and balance of the whole body. Poses are held for variable lengths, depending on the experience on the participant, characteristics of the pose and the style of yoga being practiced. Most poses can be easily modified to account for a student’s level of experience and physical condition. Some teachers utilize props, such as blocks, straps, or blankets to help students adjust challenging poses. While originally, the asanas were created to prepare the body for sitting still in meditation, they have evolved as a physical practice and are considered by many to be a moving meditation themselves.

Asanas are the yoga practices that require the most guidance and special attention for individuals with arthritis. If something seems too challenging or causes discomfort, you and the instructor can arrive at an appropriate modification.

Pranayama -

Breath is an important aspect of many yoga classes. Movement should be connected with the breath throughout yoga practice. In some poses, this means moving one direction on an inhale and the opposite direction on an exhale. Some teachers also instruct students to hold a pose for a particular number of breaths. Independent of the asanas there is another set of breathing practices to invigorate or calm the body and mind, which should only be practiced with a qualified instructor. A good resource for learning more about breathing practices is “Science of Breath” A Practical Guide” by Alan Hymes, MD.

The breathing techniques taught in beginner yoga classes are generally safe for anyone, including those with asthma or COPD, as long as they feel comfortable. If you have a lung condition, you may want to speak with your doctor about the safety of advanced breathing practices, and be sure to tell your yoga instructor about any concerns you might have.

Deep Relaxation –

At the closing of class, most teachers incorporate some type of relaxation for somewhere between 1 and 15 minutes. This is usually done in Savasana or Corpse Pose (lying on the back with eyes closed). The purpose of this relaxation is to absorb the stress and tension-reducing benefits of the asanas, so that a sense of calm and ease will carry over from the practice after the class had ended. It also relates to the original purpose of Hatha practice, relaxing the body so that it can remain completely quiet for a more meaningful meditation. In American yoga classes, the deep relaxation is often considered a reward at the end of class, though for the restless, it can often be the most challenging.

Deep relaxation is beneficial for all persons and generally requires no modification. If you are pregnant, or if lying on your back for prolonged periods is painful, your yoga instructor can suggest alternate poses for relaxation.

Meditation –

Some classes include brief periods of seated meditation before or after the asana practice. During these times, some instructors give guidance on how to approach meditation. It is a time to quiet and focus the mind, relieving it of the unnecessary clutter of trivial thoughts that stream in and out during the day. This discipline of the mind is said to allow greater spiritual awakening, but can also simply provide relief from the day’s stresses. Meditation can have any focus, such as the breath, an image, an idea or affirmation, a sound, or a personal prayer.

Modifications to the traditional cross-legged seating pose are an option for those with arthritis. Other seated positions can be used, and props such as a chair or block may be helpful.

Chanting –

Sound vibrations can be very powerful, capable of breaking glass, or even causing an avalanche. The healing properties involved with making various sounds have also recently been studied (30). Beyond healing, chants have historically served the purpose of unifying communities, or fostering an individual sense of spirituality. Not all yoga classes incorporate chanting, but some more traditional styles consider chanting to be an essential aspect of Hatha practice. Most chants in yoga class incorporate words for peace (Shanti) or words that have no translation, but are said to reflect natural universal vibrations (Om). If you don't feel like joining in with the chant, it is perfectly acceptable just to listen. It is important to note that, unlike singing, there is no judgment of quality in chant. It is a sound, not a song that is being created, though it is often beautiful and moving. (For more information on chanting, see Robert Gass, “Chanting: Discovering Spirit in Sound.”) (31).

No modifications are required for people with arthritis.