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Yoga May Ease Pain of Women with Fibromyalgia

What is this research about?

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a poorly understood condition that can have a severe impact on a person's life. It's characterized by widespread muscular pain and is associated with symptoms like fatigue, depression, and loss of sleep, among others. A person's living conditions can play a role in the development of FM; being female, older, and divorced, as well as having low levels of education and income, can have an impact. People who experience psychological distress, like anxiety and depression, are also at risk for FM. Those who experience higher levels of "pain catastrophizing" – by focusing or dwelling on pain or feelings about pain– tend to have trouble adjusting to FM.

Research suggests that yoga may be able to help those with FM. Yoga encourages mindfulness, which involves paying total attention to the present moment and not judging one's thoughts, feelings, or perceptions. It's believed that mindfulness may help people cope better with their pain. Yoga may also help regulate levels of cortisol, a hormone produced by the human body. A healthy person usually has higher cortisol levels on waking, a peak about 30 to 40 minutes into the morning, and a decline throughout the rest of the day. But people with

What you need to know:

An eight-week yoga program may decrease pain in women with fibromyalgia. It alters cortisol levels and, by making women more mindful, seems to encourage them to feel less helpless about their pain.

FM tend to have abnormal levels of cortisol, which play a role in the ongoing fatigue, pain, and stress. Previous findings, however, suggest that depressed patients who took part in yoga saw their levels of cortisol improve.

Nevertheless, there have been no studies on the impact of yoga on the cortisol levels of people with FM. (Only three papers have been published about the use of yoga to treat FM.) And there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the impact of yoga on the various dimensions of pain in a single study of patients with FM.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University in Toronto recruited 22 women with FM to take part in a 75-minute Hatha yoga class, twice a week for two months. Before, during, and after the yoga

sessions, the researchers used questionnaires to find out if the women were experiencing pain, anxiety, depression, and mindfulness. They also collected saliva samples to study cortisol levels in the women. Hatha yoga is a mind-body practice that was developed in fifteenth-century India. It uses physical yoga postures to prepare the mind for meditation.

What did the researchers find?

An eight-week Hatha yoga program may improve various symptoms for women with FM. It appears to reduce pain and “pain catastrophizing.” Women who took part in the eight-week program felt less helpless about their pain and more accepting. Mindfulness, which is inherent to yoga, may have helped women with FM to “let go” of trying to resist their pain – which, in turn, may have allowed them to cope better. Also, cortisol levels rose in women with FM, after the yoga program.

How can you use this research?

The researchers suggest that an eight-week course of yoga may help women with FM. But more research is needed on how mind-body practices like yoga impact cortisol levels. They recommend that future studies use a randomized, controlled design, with a larger sample size. A longer period of yoga sessions may yield more robust findings, and a six-month follow-up may provide valuable information.

About the Researchers

Kathryn Curtis is a PhD student in the

Department of Psychology at York University. Anna Osadchuk has recently graduated from the undergraduate program in the Department of Psychology at York, and is pursuing Medical School at McMaster. Joel Katz is Canada Research Chair in Health Psychology and Professor in the Department of Psychology at York.

kjbc@uvic.ca

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Keywords

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

