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## Yoga gains respect among doctors

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The ancient practice of yoga is finding a new following -- among doctors and medical researchers who work to discover its benefits for a variety of illnesses.

Researchers at UNC Hospitals are studying yoga's benefits for people with irritable bowel syndrome. Doctors at Duke University recently completed a study showing that yoga provided significant improvements with hot flashes, sleep and energy levels for postmenopausal women with early breast cancer.

And in Eastern North Carolina, an oncologist in Beaufort County sees improvement in his patients who take yoga classes.

"There's been an explosion of data using yoga as a treatment option," said Dr. Shelley Wroth, an obstetrician at Duke Integrative Medicine and a yoga teacher. She said studies have found that yoga helps people suffering diseases such as hypertension, anxiety, arthritis, chronic back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, stress, depression, diabetes and epilepsy.

"It shows so much promise," Wroth said.

A recent study at Duke involved breast cancer patients who were experiencing severe hot flashes and other menopause symptoms. Because of their illness, they were prohibited from taking hormone replacement therapy, so yoga was proposed as an alternative. The study found significant improvement among the women in the study who took yoga classes, compared with another group of women who did not.

"There's a lot of reactions to stress that exacerbate the menopausal symptoms," said Laura Porter, co-author of the Duke study. "Yoga -- the physical poses and the more cognitive aspects of it -- dampens the stress reactivity."

But even as science establishes yoga's benefits, less is known about why it helps. Porter and others postulate that the practice reduces stress through stretching poses, practiced breathing and meditation. For patients, stress reduction may pack extra potency.

"By taking care of stress, you're starting to eliminate some of the diseases that are caused by it," said William Frey, who is leading a yoga class at Rex Healthcare in Raleigh as part of a UNC-Chapel Hill study among patients with irritable bowel syndrome.

Frey said he began offering yoga eight years ago through UNC-CH's Program on Integrative Medicine.

"There was some concern we might be bringing spiritual elements into a very clinical setting," Frey said. "Getting the word out was difficult -- so much else was going on that was scientifically based, this was pushed off. But as people have seen its staying power, and see the results and research, there's beginning to be more respectability."

### Causes not clear

Yoga's legitimacy has increased with interest by the National Institutes of Health, which now funds studies on yoga and its affect on diseases. But some skepticism remains, in the medical profession and

among patients.

Gioia O'Connell, a 54-year-old breast cancer survivor from Apex, said she wasn't sure that yoga would help her. Her main hesitation was that yoga stemmed from Eastern roots, and she worried it was incompatible with her Christian faith. Still, she signed up as part of the study at Duke.

"I have to tell you, it was energizing," O'Connell said. After being diagnosed with cancer in 1994 and undergoing a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and rounds of daily drugs, she felt wrung out. "It helped with stiffness, aches and pains. And the breathing really did help my energy level."

Dr. John Inzerillo, an oncologist in Washington, N.C., said he has seen that benefit often for his patients. He began teaching yoga about five years ago as part of a busy practice in Goldsboro.

"We had breast cancer survivors, lymphoma survivors. Over the course of time -- three or four months -- I could see a lot more flexibility," he said, noting that patients also said they felt less stressed.

About three years ago, Inzerillo began practicing what he had been teaching and scaled back. He quit the Goldsboro practice, set up shop in Washington and wrote a book, "Passion Beyond Pain," about the importance of striking a thoughtful balance in life to overcome pain.

"I made life changes to allow me to get more enjoyment out of life and be more effective at work," he said. "People get disconnected from the things that really mean something in life."

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## YOGA'S BENEFITS

More than 1,000 studies have been conducted to determine whether yoga helps people suffering with diseases. Here's a sample from the medical literature.

**DEPRESSION:** Patients diagnosed with depression showed significant reductions in anger, anxiety and neurotic symptoms after completing yoga classes, according to researchers in California, Russia and Italy.

**CANCER:** Cancer patients reported an improvement in overall well-being after practicing yoga, researchers in Canada found. In addition, a group of women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer reported to Duke University scientists that they had fewer hot flashes, slept better and felt less tired.

**DIABETES:** People with metabolic syndrome, often a precursor to diabetes, took 90-minute yoga classes over 10 weeks and reported having higher energy, lower blood pressure and improved well-being compared with others who did not take the classes, California researchers reported.

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