

fitbody



**Any physical exercise done with breath awareness becomes yoga; anything done without the breath is just a physical practice.**

—Rajan Narayanan

teach internationally and from their Simply Yoga Institute studio, in Summit, New Jersey.

### Mounting Evidence

“Yoga may help prevent diseases across the board because the root cause of 70 to 90 percent of all disorders is stress,” says Narayanan. Yoga increases the body’s ability to successfully respond to stress by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows the heart and lowers blood pressure. That in turn suppresses sympathetic activity, reducing the amount of stress hormones in the body.

Studies collected on [PubMed.gov](http://PubMed.gov) demonstrate that yoga has been found to help manage hypertension, osteoporosis, body weight, physical fitness, anxiety, depression, diabetes, reproductive functions and pregnancy, among other issues. Studies at California’s Preventive Medicine Research Institute have tracked amelioration of heart disease. A growing body of research is validating yoga’s benefits for cancer patients, including at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. A small study at Norway’s University of Oslo suggests that yoga even alters gene expression, indicating it may induce health benefits on a molecular level.

### Cultural Challenges

“For yoga to be effective, a regular practice must be implemented, which is challenging in a culture where people can’t sit for long without an electronic device. It’s more than just popping pills,” says Narayanan.

McCall says, “Even if people can

# Yoga Enters the Medical Mainstream

## Research Proves its Health Benefits

by Meredith Montgomery

After practicing internal medicine for 10 years in Boston, Dr. Timothy McCall became a full-time writer, exploring the health benefits of yoga. As the medical editor of *Yoga Journal* and the author of *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing*, he says, “In the late 90s, the conveyor belt of patient care continued to speed up and I got frustrated. There was less time to form relationships with patients, which is essential to providing quality care without excessive tests and drugs.”

Initially, McCall found that most of the documented research on yoga was from India, and notes it was low in quality from a Western perspective (though it is now excellent). In the West, the first notable scientific yoga article was published in 1973 in *The Lancet* on combining yoga and biofeedback to manage hypertension. According to the *International Journal of Yoga*, the surge in yoga’s popularity here finally gained academic interest in 2007, and there are now more than 2,000 yoga titles in the

National Institutes of Health *PubMed.gov* database, with 200 added annually.

Initially, yoga teacher and economist Rajan Narayanan, Ph.D., founded the nonprofit Life in Yoga Foundation and Institute to offer free teacher training. Within a couple of years, the foundation’s focus shifted to integrating yoga into the mainstream healthcare system. “We realized that to make a real difference, we needed to teach doctors about yoga and its scientifically proven effects,” he says. Medical providers can earn credits to keep their licenses current by attending courses by Life in Yoga, the only yoga institution independently certified by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education.

Currently, even if physicians don’t practice yoga, it’s likely that many of their patients do. “You now see it everywhere from major medical centers to mainstream advertising,” says McCall, who notes an increase in doctors, nurses and therapists attending the Yoga as Medicine seminars he and his wife Eliana

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commit to just a few minutes of yoga practice a day, if they keep it up the benefits can be enormous."

"There are no sales reps telling doctors to use yoga therapy like there are for pharmaceuticals," remarks Narayanan, and until yoga is funded by health insurance, it will be challenging to gain full acceptance in mainstream medicine.

Another barrier is certification standards. The International Association of Yoga Therapists ([iayt.org](http://iayt.org)) and the Council for Yoga Accreditation International ([cyai.org](http://cyai.org)) are both beginning to offer certifications for therapy training programs and therapists. Narayanan is hopeful that certification could lead to yoga being covered by insurance.

Medical school curricula have started shifting to embrace complementary approaches to wellness, with many textbooks now including information on mind/body therapies. *The Principles and Practices of Yoga in Healthcare*, co-edited by Sat Bir Khalsa, Lorenzo Cohen, McCall and Shirley Telles and due out in 2016, is the first professional-level, medical textbook on yoga therapy.

"Yoga has been proven to treat many conditions, yet yoga teachers don't treat conditions, we treat individuals," says McCall. "Yoga therapy is not a one-size-fits-all prescription because different bodies and minds, with different abilities and weaknesses, require individualized approaches."

While medical research is working to grant yoga more legitimacy among doctors, policymakers and the public, McCall says, "I believe these studies are systematically underestimating how powerful yoga can be. Science may tell us that it decreases systolic blood pressure and cortisol secretion and increases lung capacity and serotonin levels, but that doesn't begin to capture the totality of what yoga is."

*Meredith Montgomery, a registered yoga teacher, publishes Natural Awakenings of Mobile/Baldwin, AL (Healthy LivingHealthy Planet.com).*



**September  
is National  
Yoga Month**

## When Yoga Can Help

- ✓ Addictions
- ✓ Anxiety spectrum disorders
- ✓ Back pain
- ✓ Cancer
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Diabetes
- ✓ Endocrine issues
- ✓ Heart disease
- ✓ Hypertension
- ✓ Mental health conditions
- ✓ Metabolic syndrome
- ✓ Musculoskeletal and neuromuscular complaints
- ✓ Neurological and immune disorders
- ✓ Pregnancy issues
- ✓ Premenstrual syndrome, perimenopausal symptoms
- ✓ Respiratory issues
- ✓ Weight management