

Clinical Trial Shows Hot Yoga Can Improve Depression Symptoms

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

November 09, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Research published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry in October 2023, revealed that heated yoga significantly reduces symptoms of depression. In an intervention group, 44% had scores that indicated the depression was in remission
- › This study confirmed results from a similar study in which people taking yoga classes had significant improvements in symptoms of depression. Depression is among the most prevalent mental health conditions and is the leading cause of disability throughout the world
- › Antidepressants are a commonly prescribed pharmaceutical intervention, which are taken by 11% of all people in the U.S. age 12 years and older. Women are 2.5 times more likely than men to take antidepressants; 60% of people have taken the medications for two years or more
- › Antidepressant side effects include an increased risk of Type 2 diabetes, sexual dysfunction, fatigue, weight gain and an increased risk of suicide. There is also very little evidence to suggest the medications benefit those taking them
- › Other safer and often better alternatives include dietary changes, exercise, stress reduction, addressing unresolved emotional conflict, balancing your gut microbiome and optimizing your omega-3 and vitamin D levels

Research published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry in October 2023, revealed that heated yoga significantly reduces symptoms of depression.¹ Yoga is a physical and

spiritual discipline that seeks to bring harmony between the mind and body.

Yoga was rooted in Indian philosophy and has since become popular throughout the world as a means of promoting mental and physical health.² Yoga that is practiced in the U.S. typically emphasizes physical postures, breathing, and meditation.

There are different styles of yoga that range from the gentle to those that are physically demanding and challenging. Research has suggested that yoga can help people quit smoking, relieve menopausal symptoms, help people lose weight, and relieve migraines or tension-type headaches.

According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health,³ studies have demonstrated that yoga improves stress management and mental and emotional health, and can help promote healthy eating habits. Additionally, yoga improves sleep quality and improves balance in community-dwelling older adults.

In addition to depression, yoga has helped reduce some symptoms of anxiety and is at least as effective as other types of exercise in relieving menopausal symptoms. A 2017 national survey⁴ showed that one out of every seven adults in the U.S. had practiced yoga in the last 12 months. The newest study found one session of heated yoga each week could effectively reduce symptoms of depression.⁵

Heated Yoga Is a Viable Treatment Option for Depression

The researchers sought to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of heated yoga to treat moderate to severe depression.⁶ They designed an eight-week randomized control trial in which 65 participants were randomly selected to participate in one of two groups. There were 33 who participated in sessions of heated yoga prescribed twice weekly over eight weeks and 32 who were placed on the waitlist.

The primary outcome measurement was a change in the Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology-Clinician Rated (IDS-CR) score between the baseline measurement to post-intervention. At baseline, the mean score was 35.6 for the combined groups and 36.9 for those in the yoga group and 34.4 for those on the waitlist.

Over a total of eight weeks, the average participant in the intervention group attended 10.3 classes. The data showed that 59.3% of those in the yoga group had a greater than or equal to 50% decrease in IDS-CR scores. Additionally, those who participated in the intervention also rated heated yoga and the aftereffects positively during their exit interviews.

As reported in a press release from Massachusetts General Hospital,⁷ the researchers also found that 44% of those who participated in heated yoga had such low IDS-CR scores that their depression could be considered in remission. Even participants who received just half of the prescribed heated yoga sessions had demonstrably reduced depressive symptoms.

“Yoga and heat-based interventions could potentially change the course for treatment for patients with depression by providing a non-medication-based approach with additional physical benefits as a bonus,” said lead author Maren Nyer, Ph.D., director of Yoga Studies at the Depression Clinical and Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital.⁸

“We are currently developing new studies with the goal of determining the specific contributions of each element – heat and yoga – to the clinical effects we have observed in depression.”

The results of this study supported the data from a 2017 study,⁹ which was a collaborative effort between researchers from Boston University School of Medicine and New York Medical College. Researchers sought to assess the effects that Iyengar Yoga and coherent breathing could have on symptoms of depression.

In this study, the subjects underwent a 12-week intervention during which one group received two classes per week and the other three classes per week. All had major depressive disorder with baseline Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) scores of 14 or greater. The outcome measures were a change in BDI-II scores and compliance with the intervention.

Fifteen people took three classes per week and 15 took two classes per week. At the completion of the intervention, the researchers found a significant decline in scores from baseline to week 12 in both groups. The researchers concluded that both groups had comparable compliance and improvements but those completing yoga three times weekly had a greater drop in BDI-II scores at week 12.¹⁰

Prevalence of Depression and Suicide

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America,¹¹ depression is among the most prevalent mental health conditions and is the leading cause of disability throughout the world. In 2020, there were an estimated 14.8 million adults and 4.1 million adolescents who had had at least one major depressive episode.

Roughly 39% of those adults with a major depressive episode did not receive treatment. Major depressive disorders (MDD) are more prevalent in women than men, nearly 20% of all adults in America will develop MDD at some point in their lives.

According to the CDC,¹² 15 million Americans visit their physician each year and receive a depressive disorder as the primary diagnosis. The percentage of emergency department visits each year for individuals with depression is 12.5%.

The facts about suicide are just as disturbing. The CDC¹³ considers suicide a serious public health risk with 48,183 people who died by suicide in 2021. This means there was one death by suicide every 11 minutes; 1.7 million people in the U.S. attempted suicide, 3.5 million made a plan and 12.3 million seriously thought about suicide.

These numbers have far-reaching physical and economic impacts on society. It's estimated that suicide and nonfatal self-harm cost the U.S. over \$500 billion in medical costs, quality of life and work loss costs in 2020.¹⁴ And yet, depression is not the only reason people commit suicide. According to the CDC,¹⁵ suicide is rarely the result of a single circumstance or event. Multiple circumstances can increase risk, including but not limited to:

Past suicide attempt	Serious illness
Criminal or legal problems	Job or financial problems
Impulsive or aggressive tendencies	Substance use
Bullying	Loss of an important relationship
Social isolation	Unsafe media portrayals of suicide

Antidepressants Are Not a Satisfactory Answer

Antidepressants are a commonly prescribed pharmaceutical intervention to treat the symptoms of depression. According to the CDC,¹⁶ 11% of all U.S. people aged 12 years and older take at least one antidepressant medication. Women are 2.5 times more likely than men to take antidepressants and more than 60% taking the prescription medications have taken them for two years or more and 14% have taken them for 10 years or more.

Antidepressants have significant side effects including drowsiness, fatigue, weight gain, sexual dysfunction and risk of suicide.¹⁷ Antidepressants can also significantly raise your risk of Type 2 diabetes in a dose-dependent manner and with a long-term prescription.¹⁸

These side effects are not balanced by a positive risk-reward as there is very little evidence to suggest antidepressants benefit people with mild to moderate depression. In fact, researchers¹⁹ have found “minimal or nonexistent” benefits in patients with mild to moderate depression and the benefits are “relatively small” for severely depressed patients.²⁰

Fortunately, there are safer, and in many cases better, alternatives including effective [lifestyle strategies and nutritional interventions](#), which I have written about before, including dietary considerations such as avoiding processed and junk foods, going

gluten-free to reduce the inflammatory response if you are sensitive to gluten, optimizing your omega-3 and vitamin D levels, and balancing your gut microbiome.

Over-the-counter supplements that have been effective in reducing symptoms of depression include St John's wort, S-adenosylmethionine (SAME), 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) and multiple B vitamins that play a role as neurotransmitters, which is powerful in individuals that are deficient in these vitamins.

Lifestyle strategies that help include exercise, reducing stress and addressing unresolved emotional conflict. Take care to minimize EMF exposure as it has been linked to anxiety and depression and consider yoga, which is an ancient system of exercise and relaxation that has effectively helped to reduce symptoms of depression in scientific study, including the featured study.

Yoga Improves Balance and Reduces Falls

Yoga also helps to improve balance and stability, which ultimately helps reduce your risk of falls. Research²¹ published in August 2022 confirms that the ability to perform a 10-second one-leg stand is independently linked to all-cause mortality. The study was published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine and sought to evaluate if completing a 10-second one-legged stance was a relevant prognostic indicator for mortality.

The researchers assessed 1,702 individuals, 68% of whom were men between 51 and 75 years of age. The assessments took place between 2008 and 2020. In this cohort, 20.4% of the individuals were unable to complete the test. The median follow-up was seven years, at which time the researchers found 7.2% of the group had died.

Of the number of participants who had died, 4.6% had been able to perform the single-leg stance and 17.5% had not. Even after adjusting for body mass index, age, sex and other comorbidities. The increased risk of all-cause mortality was higher in those who were unable to perform a single-leg stance.

Depression is a significant public health issue for which there are several strategies you can use to help alleviate the symptoms. Before accepting the inevitable list of side

effects from pharmaceutical intervention, consider trying other effective approaches to reducing your symptoms and improving your overall health.

Sources and References

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