

Yoga might be as good as physical therapy for lower back pain, says study

- Yoga may be an effective alternative to physical therapy.
- The study was a long-term one with a large and racially diverse set of participants.

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Yoga may be about as good as physical therapy for treating lower back pain, according to a new study published in a major medical journal.

The research bolsters the scientific case for yoga as a potential therapy for back pain. While the discipline has its fans in the medical community, evidence for its effectiveness is sparse.

The variety of yoga that has taken off in countries outside India emphasizes physical postures, movements, and controlled breathing. Its popularity has spawned an industry of retailers, studios and media companies catering to practitioners. Enthusiasts frequently tout yoga's health benefits, especially its capacity to reduce stress and

improve fitness. But skeptics say more research is needed to verify the claims being made.

A team of researchers from several U.S. institutions studied more than 300 racially diverse, low-income patients with chronic back pain. They split the patients into three groups, sending one to weekly yoga classes, another to weekly physical therapy sessions, and giving a third control group a book and regularly mailed newsletters on managing pain.

The study's lead author was Robert Saper, who is director of Integrative Medicine at Boston Medical Center.

Saper and his colleagues found that the weekly yoga classes helped manage pain almost as much as physical therapy, and more than education. The groups in physical therapy and yoga both used less pain medication than the control group.

The researchers published their results in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* on Monday.

"In light of the complex factors affecting both diagnosis and outcomes in chronic [lower back pain], any single treatment is unlikely to prove helpful to all or even most patients," said an accompanying editorial written by University of California, San Diego doctor and researcher Douglas G. Chang, and Stefan G. Kertesz, a doctor and researcher with Birmingham Veterans Affairs Medical Center and the University of Alabama.

"Nevertheless," they wrote, "as Saper and colleagues have shown, yoga offers some persons tangible benefit without much risk."