

Golden Years



Deborah White, owner of Serenity Pilates & Yoga, has taught numerous types of exercise groups. She said that for seniors, yoga "is amazing." She is shown at left with a group of students at her studio in Greece.

Should You Consider Taking Yoga Classes?

Experts say yoga helps with wide range of things, including flexibility, fall prevention, wellbeing

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Think yoga is just for lithe young women who can twist themselves up like pretzels and revel in chanting "ohm" in a dimly lit room? Think again.

Yoga can be a form of exercise

especially well suited to seniors, even those with health problems.

Deborah White, owner of Serenity Pilates & Yoga in Greece, has taught numerous types of exercise groups, including body shaping, water-based

exercise and step classes. She said that for seniors, yoga "is amazing. It's for health and wellness. I [help students] increase flexibility, range of motion, lung capacity and relaxation. It helps with toning and strength, too."

Yoga is becoming so popular among mature adults that White offers a senior discount.

Joanne Wu, a physician with Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Unity Spine Center, is also a nationally

registered yoga teacher instructing at Midtown Athletic Club and Jewish Community Center. She has instructed seniors dealing with chronic low back pain, osteoporosis and weight management.

"Yoga can help with many different medical conditions outside of general wellness and weight management," she said. "Yoga research is one of the fastest growing areas of interest in the medical community."

"Back pain, depression, anxiety, fall prevention, arthritis, fibromyalgia, cancer treatment side effects and healthy immune function are just the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, patients anecdotally report improved quality of life and greater independence after starting a yoga program."

John Kovacs, a certified yoga instructor, is a physical therapy assistant at Independent Living for Seniors, part of Rochester General Health System.

"On a level of cognition, balance, flexibility or anyone with a cardiac condition would benefit from yoga," he said. The breathing exercises alone should offer benefit."

Mark Sandler directs and teaches at Absolute Yoga & Wellness Center in Fairport and Rochester. He has observed seniors' health improve after practicing yoga.

"With practice, you can slow down the breath and the heart rate," he said. "For some, that has decreased the need for medication."

Vishali Varga, 50, teaches yoga at Blue Lotus Yoga in Pittsford.

"Why yoga is different from other exercises and why it's particularly good for seniors is that while you are moving a muscle, you're stretching it," Varga said. "Good, healthy muscle is full of life and blood. Ideally, firm muscle is strong and flexible."

Older adults who remain sedentary become weak and stiff. Yoga incorporated both muscle stretching and strengthening.

Rick Lynch teaches yoga at Finger Lakes Yoga Center in Canandaigua, Open Sky Yoga Center in Rochester and at Thompson Hospital in Canandaigua. He believes that yoga benefits the mind also.

"Yoga by definition is settling the mind with posture," he said. "Yoga gives [seniors] tools to help with the state of mind, gives them strength and can bring some more opening to the joints and tools to help them live with less discomfort mentally and physically."

Naturally, a senior who already



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has a few physical issues may need a few accommodations to perform yoga. White uses bolsters and yoga straps to help seniors perform certain moves. Some instructors have seniors with poor balance lean on a chair or the wall to help steady them. Seated yoga can benefit the most frail elders.

"Whether it is restorative yoga using pillows and straps, to chair yoga and Pilates-infused yoga, there is a style that will work for you," Wu said. "You just have to find the right style that meets your needs."

Of course, "there are some styles that absolutely aren't for seniors," Varga said. That's why it's important to seek a doctor's advice before beginning any form of exercise. Put away the "no pain, no gain" mentality and listen to your body. Acute pain indicates injury, and seeking a physician's clearance finding the appropriate yoga class will help in avoiding injury.

Once cleared for working out, carefully "shop" for the right yoga class. Ask the instructor, letting him know about any mobility or joint issues present.

"A good teacher will be upfront with someone to [say] this may not be the class for them and recommend a gentle yoga class," Lynch said. "Yoga is not a cure. It gives them tools to take a little more control of their lives and is a complement to traditional medicine to the other things going on in their lives."

After finding a class, all you need is a water bottle, yoga mat, comfortable, stretchy clothing and a willingness to try something new.