

GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING

Yoga & Breast Cancer



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the *Guide to Understanding
Yoga & Breast Cancer*.

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for helping Living Beyond
Breast Cancer improve our
programs and services.

Dear Friend:

More and more Americans are practicing yoga. Many women tell us they're curious about the benefits of yoga after a breast cancer diagnosis. Some say practicing yoga has brought them strength and peace of mind.

This guide introduces you to yoga and breast cancer, offers tips on getting started and helps you understand the benefits and risks. Please share what you learn with your providers, as you would any time you start or resume an exercise program.

We also invite you to visit us at LBBC.ORG to learn more about our signature yoga event, which brings communities together to support those affected by breast cancer and raises funds to continue LBBC's mission.

Warmly,

Jean A. Sachs, MSS, MLSP
Chief Executive Officer



**LIVING BEYOND
BREAST CANCER®**

Toll-Free Breast Cancer Helpline

lbbc.org/helpline

(888) 753-5222

All people pictured in this guide are
LBBC volunteers whose lives have been
affected by breast cancer. We thank them
for sharing their experiences.

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Yoga & Breast Cancer

When you find out you have breast cancer, your energy becomes focused on learning about the diagnosis and treatment.

Every person is different, but you may also seek tools to cope with stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia or fatigue. Studies suggest yoga may help with these common challenges during and after treatment. Early research also shows yoga may help improve overall quality of life. Some women who take part in yoga studies report less pain, fewer hot flashes and improved strength and body image.

Even if you don't share these concerns, yoga may serve as one part of your ongoing health regimen or spiritual practice.

“A benefit with yoga was getting stronger after treatment and being completely blown away by the healing capabilities of the human body.”

—AMY

What Makes Yoga Different From Other Exercise?

Yoga is one of many exercise and wellness options for people of all ages during and after treatment. Exercise, no matter what form, plays an important role in supporting your mind and body.

In addition to physical exercise, yoga provides a set of coping tools and a spiritual practice. Yoga aims to slow down mental chatter or racing thoughts and help you feel present in each moment. Reducing stress with yoga may address many health concerns.

A well-designed yoga program may also help restore mobility and strength after breast cancer surgery. You can adapt yoga to your fitness level and stage of treatment and recovery, changing your poses, called **asanas**, as you grow stronger or face new challenges over time. As with all forms of exercise, start slowly and check with your doctor before getting started.

“My yoga mat has become my go-to place for space — a place to be still, unencumbered by thoughts or fears. It’s a place where I can be myself and heal.”

—KAREN



10 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PROVIDERS BEFORE STARTING YOGA

- 1 Based on my situation, is it safe for me to do yoga?
- 2 What is my risk for lymphedema (see page 21)?
- 3 What poses or body movements would help me rebuild flexibility and strength?
- 4 What types of yoga or body movements should I avoid?
- 5 Should I practice balance poses at a wall to avoid falling?
- 6 Should I avoid **twists**, yoga poses that rotate the body, or **forward folds**, such as touching my toes from a standing position?
- 7 Are there other precautions I should take, based on my treatment or other medical issues?
- 8 What is the safest way for me to begin building upper-body strength?
- 9 Do you know of yoga instructors trained to work with people with breast cancer?
- 10 Could you connect me with other people with breast cancer who do yoga?



As your treatment or your yoga practice changes, check again with your providers. Remember, you can always skip poses that do not work for you.

A tenet of yoga is to balance steadiness with ease. Listen to yourself and your body. Doing so helps you rest and focus on your breath when needed, rather than pushing yourself beyond what is helpful to you.



What Is Yoga?

Yoga describes a set of activities practiced on physical, mental and spiritual levels.

Yoga's physical practice features movement. A person moves the body into a shape, holds it, and then moves into a new body shape. A physical yoga practice can look similar to some forms of martial arts, dance or tai chi.

Yoga's mental exercises, in meditation and breathing, can be woven into the physical practice or be done as independent actions. Yoga exercises that regulate breathing are called **pranayama**. Pranayama can be calming and has been shown to improve immune function in people in active cancer treatment.

The spiritual element of yoga can complement your existing religious practice, or provide a new venue if you seek spirituality in your life.

Some yoga teachers do not include spirituality as part of their teaching. If you prefer this type of practice, ask about the teacher's method so you can make your own decision.

How Is Meditation Tied Into a Yoga Practice?

Meditation means connecting to a relaxed, aware state of mind. It may be done on its own or as part of a yoga practice. Research shows meditation has many benefits, especially to people with breast cancer.

There are many different types of meditation, but all encourage the relaxation response. With meditation, you may focus on your breath, on sounds or on the movement of the body itself.

Meditation allows you to witness your fleeting or upsetting thoughts as they arise or dissolve. Your practice may make it easier for you to redirect your thoughts, without judgment, during stressful times and feel more connected to yourself and to those around you.

Is Yoga a Religion?

Yoga can complement religion, or it can stand alone as a spiritual practice. If you lack a spiritual venue and now find yourself searching for one, yoga might meet your needs.

The practices taught in yoga do not ask you to hide negative feelings but to instead witness them and try to be understanding to yourself. Sometimes, doing so can cause difficult feelings to lessen or can lead you to new understanding about what you are going through.

Instructors guide a spiritual practice in different ways. Some use readings or chants to help students center themselves and shift away from the day's worries. Others use a simple meditation of focusing on the movement of breath.

Even if a spiritual practice isn't for you, yoga may still appeal to you because it can help you develop a quiet mind and more peace within yourself. Feel free to ask your teacher about style and methods. The key is to find an instructor who makes you feel safe and who practices a yoga style that works for you.



“The day I had my port placed was very uncomfortable. I took Tylenol — no effect. I watched a movie — not distracting enough. Finally, I sat on the floor to do some breathing and meditation. What I found was taking a big breath and humming it out loudly, and repeating this action, actually removed the discomfort.”

—SUSAN

Getting Started With Yoga

Yoga exercises both the mind and the body. If you are in active treatment, yoga's mental exercises are a safe way to begin a practice.

The Mental Practice of Yoga

To gain some of the benefits of yoga, start with the mental practice, called **mindfulness**. This practice encourages you to focus attention on the natural movement of your breath or an experience in your day.

Witness your breath as you inhale and exhale, or concentrate on a specific experience, noticing without judgment if your mind wanders. Practice mindfulness and always bring the mind back to the focus. If you have an upsetting thought, don't follow it into a tangent of other thoughts. Instead, bring your attention back to your focus: the breath, or the moment.

Some who practice yoga say they feel a deep sense of security and calm, even in times of upheaval. It may take time to create that experience, especially with the challenges of breast cancer. But it may help you as you move through treatment and manage the changes in your life.

Yoga saved me in the sense that I was eventually able to cultivate stillness. I was able to find peace in the idea that I did not have control, that the fear was more detrimental than the cancer.”

—AMY

The Physical Practice of Yoga: Poses and Styles

In general, yoga is viewed as gentle and safe. Yoga instructors who work with people who have had breast cancer surgery can show you safe and enjoyable poses for beginners (see page 17).

Still, be aware that some poses could physically tax people who have or had breast cancer. These poses require touching your toes, balancing on your hands or feet, twisting the trunk of your body, supporting your body weight on your arms or forearms, turning your body upside down, and even supporting the full weight of your body on the shoulders or head — a risky practice even for someone experienced in yoga. These poses may increase your risk for lymphedema or harm you if you are living with metastatic disease. To learn more, please see section 4 (page 20).

Meet with your providers before starting any physical yoga practice, even if it is described as gentle, restorative or targeted to people with breast cancer.

Your teacher or providers should be able to show you how to **modify** poses, changing the position of the body to make the pose less intense and less challenging. Listen to your body, and change poses when they cause you discomfort; if you look around, you may see others doing modified poses, too.

If you practiced yoga or did other forms of exercise before your diagnosis, it will likely affect your strength and skill level now. You can adapt your yoga practice as your body changes, just as you would with other forms of exercise. Continue to talk with your providers about your exercise status over time.

A Few Common Yoga Poses

Here are a few basic yoga poses your teacher may mention at class. Use this information to talk with your healthcare team.

Cat and Cow Pose (Marjaryasana and Bitilasana).

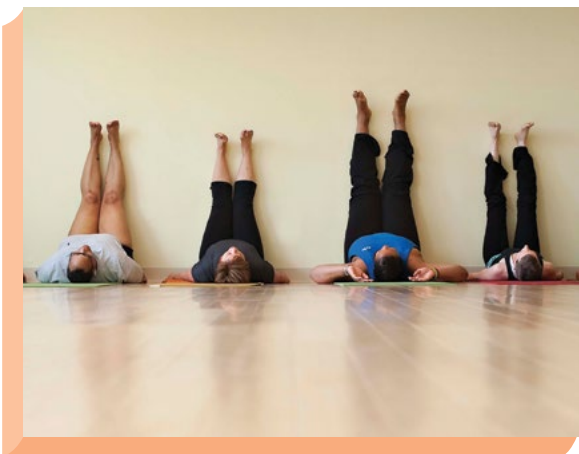
These poses are often done together. In Cat Pose, find your way onto the floor, with hands under shoulders and knees under hips on a yoga mat. The back is relaxed, in a soft, natural curve that requires little effort. Exhale and round your spine toward the ceiling, like a cat waking from a nap. Inhale and return to your natural, relaxed position. Transition into Cow Pose with an inhale, and relax your stomach toward the floor, gently lifting your head to look ahead of you. Exhale and return to the neutral position.

Tree Pose (Vrksasana). Stand at a wall or near a friend when first trying this balance pose. Position yourself with both feet flat and parallel on the floor, lifting one foot and placing the bottom of that foot on the other leg, either above or below the knee. Do not place the foot on the knee-joint. If you can balance with the standing leg straight, bring both arms up in front of your chest with palms facing each other. Keep the arms up and gaze forward. Imagine sending roots down into the earth from the bottoms of your feet.

Child's Pose (Balasana). This is considered a go-to resting pose; it is often done at the end of a yoga practice. Kneel on the floor and sit back on the heels, leaning the upper body forward to fold over the thighs. Rest the arms at your sides, and rest your forehead on the floor in front of your knees. You can modify the pose by placing a block under your forehead and a rolled up blanket at the back of the knees, or by opening the knees and placing the forehead on a block. Modify for your comfort level, and your body's needs.

Relaxation Pose (Savasana). Lie on the floor with your knees slightly bent. Lightly lift your pelvis and release. Inhale and straighten your right leg out on the floor; then, inhale and straighten your left leg out on the floor. Use a folded towel or small pillow to support your neck and head. Reach your arms toward the sky and slightly rock your upper body side to side, to loosen the muscles and deepen the pose. Slowly bring your arms to the floor, palms up and slightly away from the body. Be aware of and release any tension in your body. Prop with a rolled up blanket under the knees for comfort.

Legs Up the Wall Pose (Viparita Karani). This pose is known for relaxing the mind and body; many people use it right before going to bed. Sit next to a wall. Swing your legs around and up the wall, using your arms for support and gently letting your back down onto the floor. Stay there with your legs up the wall and your body supported by the floor, breathing slowly and allowing your body to relax. If you feel too much stretch in the backs of your legs, come out of the pose and move yourself farther away from the wall. To come out of the pose, bend your knees and roll to one side — don't stand up right away.



Popular Yoga Styles

We list these styles in alphabetical order, to help you understand the terms you may hear as you search for classes.

Ashtanga. A style for experienced yogis that is equally physical and mental. Breath is coordinated with the move from one pose to the next. Poses are pre-planned in specific order.

Bikram. Rigorous 26-pose practice, done in pre-planned order in a 105-degree room. Not recommended after breast cancer surgery.

Flow. Blanket term for a physical yoga class that requires quick transitions.

Hatha. Blanket term for a physical yoga practice.

Iyengar. Focuses on aligning the body in specific poses, rather than the flow from pose to pose. Uses props to tailor each pose to your ability.

Restorative. Gentle practice focused on flexibility. Uses props, such as blocks or straps. Poses are held for long periods. A calming practice.

Viniyoga. Adapted to the needs of attendees. No planned poses.

Vinyasa. Focuses on movement into and out of poses, using breath to move from one pose to the next. Usually involves poses called Sun Salutations, which are not recommended after a breast cancer diagnosis.

Yin. Slow practice with poses held for long periods that work the connective tissues, often in the lower body. A gentle yet intense practice. The deep stretching in this practice may be risky after breast cancer surgery, so talk with your providers.

Special Situations

After any breast cancer surgery, watch for yoga poses that could increase your risk for lymphedema. You may also need special instruction if you have metastatic breast cancer.

Your yoga program should be tailored to your individual needs, based on medical advice about what movements are safe and helpful.

Lymphedema Risk and Yoga

Lymphedema is a condition that may cause swelling in the arm, breast, chest, back and hand in the upper quarter of your body, on the side where lymph nodes were removed, or where radiation or surgery happened during treatment for breast cancer. This condition causes swelling, pain and a higher-than-average risk of infection because of lack of drainage of lymph fluid. Anyone who has breast cancer surgery or radiation therapy to the lymph nodes has some lifetime risk of lymphedema, although that risk is highest in the 3 years after treatment.

You can take precautions during your yoga practice to reduce your lymphedema risk. Research shows a strength-building program should start and progress very slowly. Your healthcare team should advise you on the best starting weight for you.

All people must be careful with poses that put their full weight, or a large percentage of it, on their arms. As a beginner, choose poses that keep your hands off the floor. You may also use the wall for support when others use the floor. Finding the right yoga program may be the best help.

Slow-moving, rhythmic movements in yoga may help prevent lymphedema because they encourage lymph flow. Pay close attention to the arm near the area where lymph nodes were removed and near areas that had radiation. If those areas feel full or heavy, fatigued, achy or tingling, stop and rest. When those sensations persist, check with your doctor.

Little research has been done on the safety of yoga for women with lymphedema. If you have the condition, or are considered at high risk of developing it, talk with your providers. They may recommend you wear well-fitted compression garments to compress your arm, hand and trunk during, and for an hour after, yoga sessions. They may also recommend that you monitor the temperature where you practice — the room should not be hot. You may benefit especially from yoga breathing exercises (see page 11) and slow poses believed to enhance lymph flow. Modify your practice; poses that involve weight bearing on the arms should be avoided or introduced slowly and progressively. Examples are Downward Dog, Plank and Cobra. To help researchers learn more about the safety of yoga for people with lymphedema, talk to your doctor about taking part in a study. Learn more at [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov).

Tips to Lessen Your Risk for Developing Lymphedema During Yoga

- Make an appointment with a physical therapist specializing in lymphedema before getting started. Ask about safe movements and poses.
- Do not overuse or overexert the arm on the side you had surgery.
- Avoid vigorous or repetitive activities with the affected arm.

- Do not practice in a heated room. Hot yoga, power yoga and Bikram yoga are usually done in heated rooms.
- Progress slowly in your yoga practice.
- Don't hesitate to modify your poses or rest when you feel tired, even if other students are moving.
- Advocate for yourself! Let your instructor know you want no **adjustments**, the common practice of assisting you more deeply into yoga poses, which may result in injury. Ask for props, breaks and other help when you need it.

LEARN MORE

To learn more, order or download LBBC's *Guide to Understanding Lymphedema* at LBBC.ORG.

“One time after an hour-long yoga session, both arms swelled. I am now learning that I have to compromise a bit with yoga, either skip the arm-intensive poses, or get in and out of the pose right away.”

—LYNN, WHO HAS LYMPHEDEMA

Living With Metastatic Breast Cancer

Many women living with **metastatic**, or stage IV, breast cancer practice yoga. Gentle and restorative yoga may improve concentration and fatigue, lessen anxiety and pain, and control stress. A mental yoga practice helps manage feelings of uncertainty as you wait for test results and deal with the daily stresses of living with metastatic disease.

Keep in mind some special precautions as you pursue a practice. Your providers may advise against doing some common yoga poses, such as twists, forward-bending



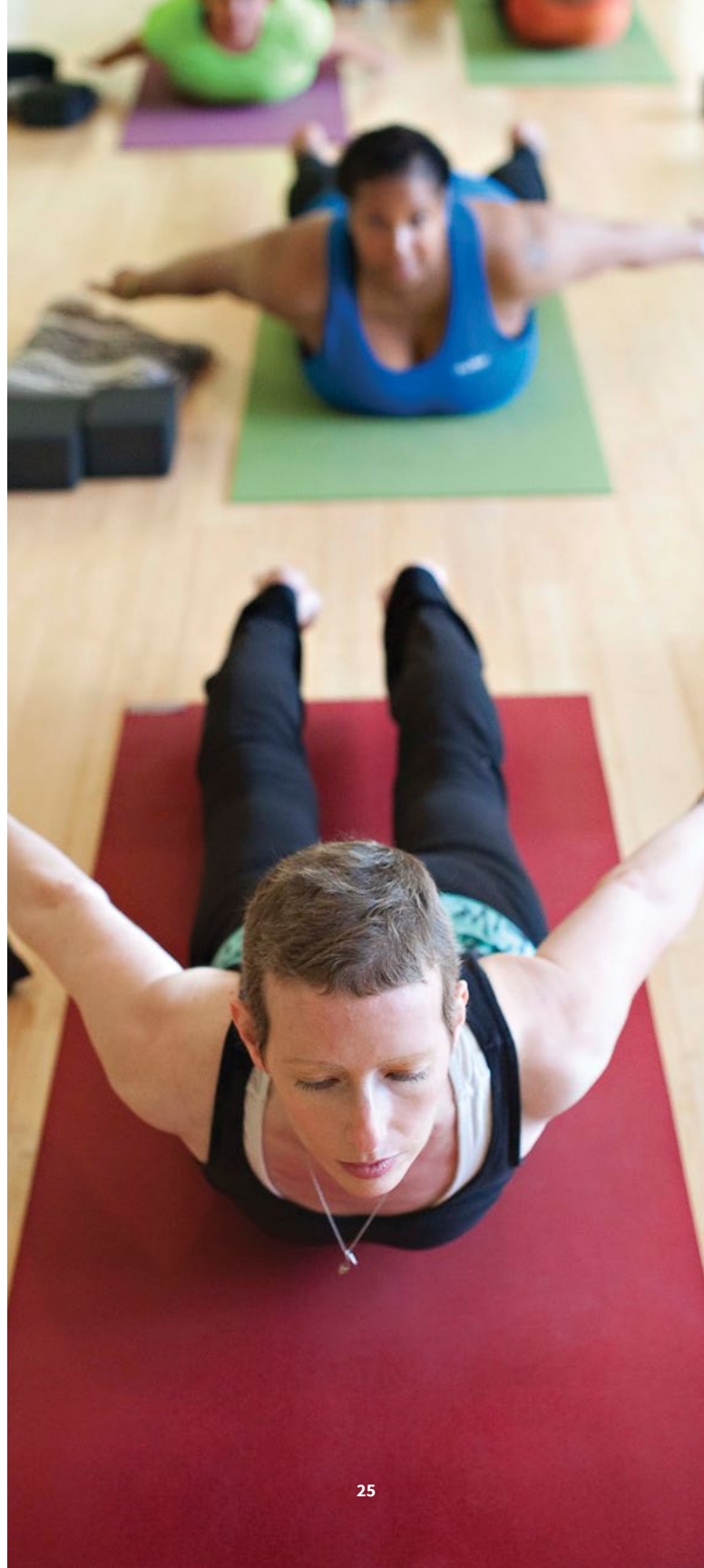
stretches, backbends, balance poses and **inversions**, poses that put your head lower than your heart. If you have bone metastasis, your bones may fracture more easily. With liver metastasis, avoid poses that pull or cause tension on the abdomen, a feeling common to many yoga poses.

Lung metastasis sometimes interferes with breathing. Some pranayama practices (see page 11) include very deep breaths or quickened breathing, or have you take a partial breath and then pause, holding the breath. During pranayama, you may lie on the floor with a blanket or pillow under the upper body to open the chest. Review such practices with your providers first.

Pay attention to your body. Avoid breathing practices that cause pain, dizziness, lightheadedness or shortness of breath. Change your position if lying flat causes trouble breathing or pain.

Your providers may suggest ways to modify poses or advise you to avoid group yoga classes or some yoga styles. Be specific about the practice of interest to you, including room temperature, poses (photos help), and body positions during meditations.

There is no standard, one-size-fits-all advice — only your providers can confirm a practice is safe for you.



Finding the Right Yoga for You

Today those affected by breast cancer have many options for yoga. Start by looking for a practice tailored to people like you.

Finding a Class, Style and Teacher

In general, yoga instructors are not licensed or overseen by a professional organization. Some instructors may be unaware of the science behind healthy body movement or the impact of breast cancer treatments on the body.

Search for someone qualified to teach yoga to people who have had breast cancer treatment. Your health-care team may be able to help. Ask others who have had breast cancer. You can also ask general yoga students, especially if they have ongoing pain conditions, or they practiced yoga while healing from an injury or recovering from surgery.

Your instructor should have training in building strength and flexibility after surgery. Those connected to hospitals or cancer or rehab centers may be more likely to know about safe poses for people with breast cancer, but some instructors in private practice receive special training as well. Remind your teachers about your health status over time, in case they forget, and make sure they will accept advice from your health-care team.



10 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR YOGA INSTRUCTOR

- 1 How long have you taught yoga?
- 2 Have you taught yoga to someone with breast cancer? What precautions did you take?
- 3 Have you taught yoga to someone recovering from an injury or surgery?
- 4 How would you practice differently if you just had breast cancer surgery?
- 5 What yoga poses do you teach in class? Do you have sequences of poses I could see?
- 6 Do you include meditation or spirituality in your teaching?
- 7 What temperature will the room be during your class?
- 8 Can you connect me to yoga students who practiced during breast cancer treatment?
- 9 What type of ongoing training do you receive?
- 10 Would you be comfortable if I ask not to be adjusted in class? What if I opt out of or modify a pose?

Consider starting with personal or small-group yoga sessions. Many large hospitals and healthcare centers offer group yoga classes designed for people with cancer. Ask the instructors about their training, and talk with your providers about them first.

Open group classes at private studios aren't typically designed for people affected by cancer. They may feature poses not appropriate for you because they may increase risks for lymphedema or should not be practiced if you have metastatic disease. To learn more, please see section 4 (page 20).

If you are in active treatment, avoid drop-in classes, unless they are specific to people with breast cancer.

With all classes, it can be helpful to contact the instructor first to discuss your treatment. Observe the class (see page 30) and take notes. Get a feel for the pace, and how the instructor interacts with students. Describe the body movements for your provider, such as “twisting from the waist while seated,” “balancing on one foot,” “standing, then touching the toes” and “multiple movements similar to a push-up.”

You can also write down the names of poses and look them up on *Yoga Journal's* pose finder at yogajournal.com/poses. Share them with your providers.

The yoga ethic of being aware and listening to your body can help protect you from injury. If something hurts or makes you fearful, come out of that pose slowly and rest.

10 QUESTIONS FOR OBSERVING A YOGA CLASS

- 1 Does the instructor encourage students to respect their limits?
- 2 Are transitions from pose to pose done slowly or quickly?
- 3 Are movements slow and fluid, or fast and abrupt?
- 4 Does the class include a warm-up?
- 5 Does the group do difficult movements right away?
- 6 How long are poses held?
- 7 Does the class feel competitive? (Students rarely modify poses in such a class.)
- 8 How do students know to modify poses? Does the teacher help or encourage them?
- 9 Do students use props, such as blocks, rolls or blankets?
- 10 Is meditation or breathing part of the class?



Paying for Yoga

In general, health insurance does not pay for yoga classes, but there are some exceptions. Check with your employer and health insurance provider. Find out if complementary care [riders](#), or extra coverage, are available through your health insurance plan, and if that coverage includes yoga. Your instructor might also be able to work with you. Some offer a sliding scale, and you pay what you can afford. You might also be able to connect with other students with breast cancer. They may agree to share the cost of semi-private sessions.

Search online for classes nearby, using “free yoga classes + (your city and state).” Those at local hospitals, yoga studios and healthcare centers may have classes intended for people with cancer that are sometimes low cost — or even free. Another resource, [yogabear.org](#), connects people with cancer to local yoga resources, many of them free.

Moving Ahead

Yoga is one of many mind-body practice options. Even if yoga is not for you, talk with your providers about safe exercise or mind-body practices, whether you are in treatment or years beyond. Your research on yoga classes may not lead you to a yoga practice, but it may help you determine what type of environment and exercise you want to pursue. The best option will be the one of greatest interest to and pleasure for you.

LEARN MORE

Read our *Guide to Understanding Complementary Therapies* for more information.

“I encourage people to just get involved in something that will give them some outlet in coping with the disease.”

—LIZ

Resources

Words to Know

Adjustments. The practice of an instructor assisting you more deeply into yoga poses. This can cause injury, so let your instructor know you do not want adjustments.

Asanas. Another name for yoga poses.

Ashtanga. A style for experienced yogis that is equally physical and mental. Breath is coordinated with the move from one pose to the next. Poses are pre-planned in specific order.

Bikram. Rigorous 26-pose practice, done in pre-planned order in a 105-degree room. Not recommended after breast cancer surgery.

Cat and Cow Pose (Marjaryasana and Bitilasana). These poses are done on the floor, often together. They cause the body to move in ways that remind people of the animals for which they are named.

Child's Pose (Balasana). A resting pose that is done on the floor, often at the end of a yoga practice.

Flow. Blanket term for a physical yoga class that requires quick transitions.

Forward folds. Yoga poses that involve bending toward the front, such as touching your toes while standing.

Hatha. Blanket term for a physical yoga practice.

Inversions. Poses that put your head lower than your heart. If you have metastatic disease, your healthcare providers may advise against doing these poses.

Iyengar. A style of yoga that focuses on aligning the body in specific poses, rather than the flow from pose to pose. Uses props to tailor each pose to your ability.

Legs Up the Wall Pose (Viparita Karani). This pose is done on the floor, next to a wall. It is known for relaxing the mind and body.

Lymphedema. A condition that may cause swelling in the arm, breast, chest, back and hand in the upper quarter of your body, on the side where lymph nodes were removed, or where radiation or surgery happened during treatment for breast cancer.

Meditation. A practice that connects you to a relaxed, aware state of mind. It may be done on its own or as part of a yoga practice. Research shows meditation has many benefits, especially to people with breast cancer.

Metastatic (stage IV). At this stage, breast cancer has spread from the breasts and nearby lymph nodes to other places in the body. Many people with metastatic disease practice yoga. Talk to your healthcare providers and your instructor about precautions you should take.

Mindfulness. A mental practice in which you focus your attention on the natural movement of your breath or an experience in your day.

Modify. Changing the position of the body to make a yoga pose less intense and less challenging.

Pranayama. Yoga exercises that regulate breathing.

Relaxation Pose (Savasana). This pose is done on the floor. It is used to relieve tension.

Restorative. Gentle, calming practice focused on flexibility. Uses props, such as blocks or straps. Poses are held for long periods of time.

Riders. Extra coverage that may be available through your health insurance plan. This coverage may cover yoga costs.

Tree Pose (Vrksasana). This pose is done standing, with a focus on balance.

Twists. Yoga poses that rotate the body.

Viniyoga. A style of yoga that is adapted to the needs of attendees. No planned poses.

Vinyasa. A style of yoga that focuses on movement into and out of poses, using breath to move from one pose to the next. Usually involves poses called Sun Salutations, which are not recommended after a breast cancer diagnosis.

Yin. Slow practice with poses held for long periods of time that work the connective tissues, often in the lower body. A gentle yet intense practice. The deep stretching in this practice may be risky after breast cancer surgery, so talk with your providers.

Yoga. A set of activities practiced on physical, mental and spiritual levels.

Many thanks to these individuals who contributed their time and expertise for this guide:

AUTHOR

Jana Hill

Freelance Writer and Editor
Certified Yoga Instructor

EDITORS

Eric Fitzsimmons

Nicole Katze, MA

LIVING BEYOND BREAST CANCER REVIEWERS

Lynn Folkman Auspitz

Amy Grillo

Janine E. Guglielmino, MA

LEAD REVIEWER

Mary Pullig Schatz, MD

Author, *Back Care Basics*

Creator, *Relaxation Basics* audio CD

Physical Medicine Associates, Nashville, Tennessee

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE REVIEWERS

Advocacy

Carol Doeringer

Stepup-Speakout.org

Bonnie Pike

Stepup-Speakout.org

Rachel Redden, RYT

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Physicians

Virginia F. Borges, MD, MMSc

University of Colorado, Denver, Colorado

Judith Nudelman, MD

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island

Physical Therapy

Susan Dean, PT

Bellevue, Washington

Psychology

Stephanie Sohl, PhD, RYT

Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem,
North Carolina

Spirituality

Alejandro Chaoul, PhD

MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Texas

Yoga Instruction

Amy Annis

Travel Well Yoga Retreats, La Pointe,

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Theresa Elliott

Taj Yoga/Pacific Yoga Teacher Training,

Seattle, Washington

Karen Gagnier, RYT 500

RePose Yoga, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Susan Gremmert, MEd

Redmond, Washington

CONSUMER ADVISORY COMMITTEE REVIEWERS

Michelle Baldino, Somerdale, New Jersey

Elizabeth Barker, Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania

*We dedicate this guide to the memory of
Darcie Vugrinovich, who contributed to an
earlier edition.*

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

BECK Photography

Masters Group Design

More Resources

Visit LBBC.ORG or call (855) 807-6386 to order our other *Understanding* publications:

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- Breast Cancer During Pregnancy
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- Getting the Care You Need as a Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Person



This brochure is designed for educational and informational purposes only, as a resource to individuals affected by breast cancer. The information provided is general in nature. For answers to specific healthcare questions or concerns, consult your healthcare provider, as treatment for different people varies with individual circumstances. The content is not intended in any way to substitute for professional counseling or medical advice.

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