# How Yoga Can Help COPD Symptoms

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## Yoga for COPD

Living with COPD is difficult at the best of times, which can make exercise uncomfortable and disheartening. Luckily, yoga for COPD is showing promise as an effective tool for fitness and COPD management. Most modern yoga studios focus their classes on a broad selection of postures to appeal to the strength, flexibility and cardiovascular fitness of the participants.

As someone living with the chest discomfort, cough and shortness of breath that COPD brings, it is important to understand which aspects of yoga will be most helpful and how to craft a practice that will strengthen your body and breathing without causing discomfort.

COPD makes you aware of your breath and breathlessness. Yoga allows you to focus on your breath, but in a much more positive fashion. The two general elements in yoga — breath and movement — can help you overcome your COPD discomfort in different ways.

**Movement (Asanas)**

The movement in yoga is introduced through postures (called asanas) that are strung together in therapeutic patterns. Sometimes these poses are static, and sometimes they flow together. Depending on the specific postures, how quickly you transition between each and how many you go through in a class, the practice can be more or less demanding on your body.

Since yoga exercises are generally stationary, they are easier to learn and follow than many other exercises. The low impact movement is gentle on your joints, but will slowly and effectively strengthen your muscles. As your flexibility and strength improve, your tolerance for exercise increases, and you can keep your body in better shape to counter your COPD discomforts.

**Breathing (Pranayama)**

The way you use your breath during a yoga practice is just as important as the physical poses you do. In fact, they are often blended together, so your inhalations and exhalations correspond to particular movements, helping you calm and energize your muscles as needed. At other times, specific breathing techniques (known as pranayama) are used on their own, without moving through postures.

Learning to control your breath will not only release tension, but it will also strengthen your respiratory muscles. Deep, slow breathing teaches you to fill and empty your lungs completely.

When you live with COPD, too much stress can make your symptoms harder to handle and your quality of life can suffer. Together, asanas and pranayama will help you relieve the stress on your mind and body as it improves your physical strength and range of motion.

## Finding a Suitable COPD Yoga Routine

Your first challenge is to find the right class for your abilities (and respiratory limitations). It's best to choose a class designed for people with respiratory problems, so you don't overextend yourself and wind up in a COPD exacerbation.

Your yoga teacher should walk you through proper breathing techniques before the class and help you to master the movements. If they have worked with COPD patients before, they will be able to craft a good class for you, including some of these particularly helpful types of postures.

- **Bends.** Back bends and forward bends are a big part of many yoga practices. They help you strengthen your core, straighten your posture and open up various joints and muscle groups. For COPD, standing back bends can really help open your chest muscles, but you must do them carefully with good guidance from your instructor to avoid strain. Standing forward bends can help you with exhalation.
- **Seated postures.** It's important to incorporate some more passive postures that involve sitting or lying on your yoga mat too. Seated forward bends can help you improve your flexibility, and there are a variety of twists to help you stretch and strengthen your spine. However, avoid lying on your chest or stomach, and don't fold over in child's pose — these postures will put too much pressure on your diaphragm.
- **Abdominal breathing.** Different breathing techniques are used in yoga, but deep belly breathing is a mainstay, and it is perfect for those with COPD. By breathing as much air into your belly as you can, then forcing it out completely by contracting your stomach muscles, ribs and diaphragm, you can train yourself to breathe more deeply.

## The Benefits of a Group Setting

You may be tempted to do yoga at home, especially if you haven't exercised for quite some time. Bringing pranayama breathing into your daily routine can be immensely beneficial, but keeping your whole yoga practice confined to your living room may not be such a good idea.

You don't have to make it a daily commitment, but attending a yoga class in a local studio, clinic or community center on a regular basis can help you in a few ways.

### Social Time

Like many chronic conditions, COPD can be isolating and depressing. The physical COPD symptoms may keep you in your bed or on the couch, and the stigma of COPD can attack your confidence and lead you to hide from your community. Getting out and into an exercise class with people who understand how you feel and what you are living with is liberating, comforting and encouraging (not to mention one of the healthiest things you can do).

### Good Guidance

Staying in good form is harder than you think. It's easy to lean too far, dip too deep or bend when you should be straightening without even noticing your mistake. When you practice in a class, you have other participants to use for reference, and more importantly, a trained instructor who can subtly and gently correct any problems with your posture. The better your form, the safer and more effective the exercise, so it is better to work under a watchful eye.

### Stress Relief

Yoga is always a good stress reliever, but when you get away from your home, it is easier to get away from any stress or strain associated with your daily life. Yoga studios are perfectly calm and clear spaces, without clutter, bright lights or distracting sounds to draw your attention away from your practice. You can even attend an evening class with dim lighting or candles if you are looking to relax and unwind even more.

## In Conclusion

Yoga isn’t just a new-age exercise in spirituality — it is a powerful way to restore your physical and mental comfort. The mind-body connection is meant to help you improve your health and control, not subscribe to a new belief system or become more flexible than the people around you. Use your yoga practice in any way you like, and remember that yoga is never about competition.