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The Impact of Yoga in Older People Living in the Community: A Brief Overview

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Abstract

As the world's population continues to age, there is a growing focus on improving the quality of life and overall well-being of the elderly. In recent years, mind-body exercises have arisen as a popular type of physical exercise among older adults in both Eastern and Western countries [1]. In the last 10 years, yoga has been established as a key physical activity intervention for older adults [1]. Yoga is a system of mind-body practices that includes gentle movements or postures (asanas), breathing (pranayama) and relaxation techniques, reciting mantras, visualizations, and meditations, all of which can be adapted to suit practitioner ability [2]. For example, chair-based yoga has been successfully applied in geriatric [3]. This brief overview provides the latest evidence about the role of yoga therapy in promoting the well-being of the elderly, by exploring its physical and psychosocial benefits.

Introduction

Recently, systematic reviews of yoga-based interventions have been published in cognitively healthy older adults. Although research is needed to determine the optimal dose of yoga to maximize health impact, these systematic reviews reported improvements in balance, mobility [4], mental well-being and quality of life in people aged 60+ years [5]. Although yoga may not offer benefit over active interventions (for example, exercise), it may affect frailty markers that are associated with clinically meaningful outcomes in older adult populations [6]. When compared with education or inactive control, it has been established moderate-certainty evidence that yoga improved gait speed, lower-extremity strength and endurance in older adults [6].

These results have particular importance, considering that slow gait speed is a criteria of frailty phenotype [7] and the last world guideline for falls prevention and management for older adults recommend the assessment of gait speed for predicting falls risk (GRADE 1A) [8]. Even the fear of falling is associated with decreased physical functioning and an increased fall risk in older people, and holistic exercise, such as Pilates or yoga, have been associated with a greater reduction in fear of falling [9]. There is increased public and academic interest into the potential benefits of yoga for older people with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and dementia and a recent systematic review shows that yoga may be safe and beneficial for the well-being of people with MCI or dementia [10].



From a clinical perspective, it is recommended that yoga practitioners seeking to apply or recommend this complementary therapy and undertake dementia awareness or competency training to appropriately facilitate sessions [10]. This is especially important when applying person-centered care and adapting the exercises to suit and meet the needs of the person living with cognitive decline [10]. From a research perspective, more high quality randomized controlled trials are needed to improve the evidence-base and overcome the limitations of existing studies [10].

A final note on resilience. Resilience is described as the capacity to cope with adversity and challenge across one's lifespan, and enhancing resilience is a key process for maintaining older adults' well-being [11]. Although long-term clinical verification is required, high quality evidence demonstrates that two mind-body approaches, including yoga-related programs, enhance resilience in older adults [12]. As highlighted, yoga appears to be a promising intervention for older people. However, the effects of yoga need to be proven with further rigorous research and standardized protocols.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of interest

None.

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