

**Review Article**

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# Yoga Benefits in Patients Recovering from Serious Spinal Injuries: The Interplay Between Asanas, General Physical and Mental Health and Neurological Improvement

**Pablo Martínez-Soler<sup>1</sup>, Juan F Martínez-Canca<sup>2\*</sup> and María I. Soler-Gutiérrez<sup>3</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Junior Surgical Doctor at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust, UK<sup>2</sup>Consultant Neurosurgeon, NeuroKonsilia, Spain<sup>3</sup>Certified Iyengar Yoga Instructor, Senior Collaborator, University of Málaga, Spain**\*Corresponding author:** Juan F Martínez-Canca, Consultant Neurosurgeon, NeuroKonsilia, Spain.**Received Date:** September 07, 2023**Published Date:** September 19, 2023

## Introduction

Serious spinal injuries are life-altering events that often result in long and challenging recovery processes. These injuries can cause physical disability, chronic pain, and emotional distress, significantly affecting the quality of life for those who suffer from them [1]. While conventional rehabilitation methods have proven effective, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that yoga can play a vital role in the recovery process. Yoga, an ancient practice originating from India, involves a combination of physical postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation. This essay explores the benefits of yoga in patients recovering from serious spinal injuries, emphasizing the interplay between asanas, general physical and mental health, and neurological improvement.

Iyengar Yoga particular use of props plays a crucial role for individuals with spinal injuries, helping them approach asanas (yoga postures) safely and effectively [2]. These props, such as belts, blocks, and bolsters, are like supportive tools that enable patients to gradually and safely work towards achieving the closest possible posture to the correct asanas.

## Yoga Asanas and Physical Health

### Flexibility and Range of Motion

One of the primary physical benefits of yoga in spinal injury recovery is the improvement in flexibility and range of motion. Many yoga asanas are designed to gently stretch and strengthen the muscles surrounding the spine, which can be particularly beneficial for individuals with spinal injuries [3]. Regular practice of yoga postures can lead to increased flexibility in the spine and a wider range of motion, reducing the risk of complications such as muscle atrophy and joint stiffness.

### Pain Management

Chronic pain is a common issue for individuals recovering from spinal injuries. Yoga asanas can help manage and alleviate pain by releasing endorphins, the body's natural painkillers [4]. The gentle stretching and strengthening of the spine and surrounding muscles can reduce tension and provide relief from pain, promoting a more comfortable recovery process without relying solely on medication [5].

## Posture and Alignment

Maintaining adequate posture and alignment is crucial for spinal injury patients to prevent further complications. Yoga emphasizes the importance of body awareness and alignment during asana practice. This heightened awareness can translate into improved posture and alignment in daily life, reducing the risk of secondary injuries or complications [6]. For individuals with spinal injuries, maintaining proper alignment and avoiding strain is of paramount importance. Props assist in creating a stable and balanced foundation, reducing the risk of injury or exacerbating existing conditions. They allow patients to adjust and customize their practice to their unique needs and limitations, making yoga accessible and therapeutic. By deep mind involvement, exquisite anatomical alignment, and strategic use of props, Iyengar Yoga helps individuals with spinal injuries experience the benefits of yoga, including increased flexibility, strength, and relaxation, while minimizing the potential for discomfort or harm. This approach underscores the adaptability and inclusivity of yoga, making it a valuable tool for rehabilitation and improving overall well-being.

## Yoga and Mental Health

### Stress Reduction

The psychological impact of serious spinal injuries cannot be overstated. Patients often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression during their recovery journey. Yoga incorporates mindfulness and relaxation techniques that can significantly reduce stress levels. Meditation and deep breathing exercises (pranayama) can help patients manage their emotions, enhance mental clarity, and promote a sense of calm and well-being [7].

### Improved Sleep

Sleep disturbances are common among individuals recovering from spinal injuries, partly due to pain and anxiety. Yoga's relaxation techniques can contribute to better sleep quality. Regular practice can help patients relax their bodies and minds, making it easier to fall asleep and stay asleep, which is essential for the healing process [8].

### Enhanced Self-Esteem and Body Image

Spinal injury patients often grapple with changes in body image and self-esteem due to physical limitations and visible injuries [9]. Yoga promotes self-acceptance and a positive body image by fostering a sense of connection between the mind and body. As patients experience progress in their practice, they may gain confidence and develop a more positive self-image [10].

## Yoga and Neurological Improvement

### Nervous System Regulation

Yoga has been shown to have a positive impact on the autonomic nervous system, which controls functions like heart rate, digestion, and stress response. Patients recovering from spinal injuries may experience dysregulation of the nervous system [11]. Certain yoga practices, such as pranayama and meditation, can help restore balance to the autonomic nervous system, leading to improved overall health and well-being [10].

## Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt and rewire itself in response to injury or new experiences [12]. Yoga's emphasis on mindful movement and breath awareness can stimulate neuroplasticity in spinal injury patients. Regular practice may encourage the brain to establish new neural pathways, potentially aiding in the recovery of lost motor skills and sensory functions [13,14].

## Conclusion

Yoga, with its multifaceted approach encompassing asanas, general physical and mental health, and neurological improvement, offers a holistic and complementary therapy for patients recovering from serious spinal injuries [15]. The physical benefits of increased flexibility, pain management, and improved posture are augmented by the mental health advantages of stress reduction, better sleep, and enhanced self-esteem. Furthermore, the potential for neurological improvement through the regulation of the nervous system and stimulation of neuroplasticity makes yoga a promising addition to the rehabilitation toolkit [10].

It is important to note that yoga should be integrated into a comprehensive treatment plan under the guidance of healthcare professionals, including physical therapists and yoga instructors with expertise in working with spinal injury patients [10]. As research in this area continues to expand, a clearer understanding of the specific benefits and best practices for incorporating yoga into spinal injury recovery will emerge. Nonetheless, the existing evidence underscores the potential of yoga as a valuable and holistic approach to aid in the physical, mental, and neurological rehabilitation of individuals facing the challenges of serious spinal injuries.

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## Conflict of interest

None.

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