

Can yoga be beneficial for scoliosis in children and young adults?

By Christine Jaureguiberry, BA, Certified Yoga for Scoliosis teacher

Having a child who has just been diagnosed with scoliosis can be worrying time for parents. What treatment is best? Will the curve progress any further? Does my child possibly need an operation? Will she/he be able to live a normal life? These are just some questions going through parents' minds. Your child might be equally anxious, possibly concerned about their looks and just generally feeling out of balance, let alone the aches and pains that they might be experiencing.

As every scoliosis curve is unique, so is every scoliosis story.

My scoliosis story

I was diagnosed with structural, idiopathic scoliosis at the age of 5 in the early 1980s in Germany. Because my curve was mild to moderate I was referred to a physiotherapist but stopped after a couple of years or so because I generally didn't experience any pain. It was only in my late teenage years that I was starting to have increased back and neck pain.

In my early 20s I worked in the hotel industry and found it increasing difficult to stand up for long periods of time. I spend a lot of time and money trying out different treatments (physiotherapy, acupuncture, chiropractic treatments, osteopathy etc.) but found that the effect was always temporary.

When I came to London in 2004 I found yoga and it has helped me ever since to manage most of my symptoms and prevent my curve from getting worse. It has empowered me to look after my own health rather than always relying on doctors, treatments, and painkillers to make me feel better.

Since starting practising yoga and then eventually qualifying as yoga teacher (200 hour certified by Yoga Alliance Professionals), I have done a lot of my own research into the subject and worked extensively with yoga teachers, like Adelene Cheong (UK) and Elise Browning Miller (USA), to become a certified Yoga for Scoliosis teacher.

I now teach yoga to adults and children with scoliosis who have often much more severe curves than my own. Looking back, I sometimes wish I had started practising yoga

much earlier in my life since it might have helped me through physical and emotional challenges associated with scoliosis during my teenage years.

What is yoga?

Yoga is an ancient practice (over 5000 years old) that originated in India. The Sanskrit word yoga can be translated as to yolk, to bind, or to unite. It's a system that was designed to empower health and a greater sense of 'Self', connecting the body, mind, and spirit. It has been passed down through generations of teachers and was introduced to the West in the late 19th century. It is now a widespread discipline that is practised all over the world although in Western countries the emphasis continues to be mainly on the physical aspects and the yoga postures.

Physical yoga practice (asana) is a low impact type of activity that is very beneficial when working with scoliosis.

What are the benefits of Yoga for Scoliosis?

When we practise yoga, we develop mental and physical focus. We develop strength, flexibility, and greater body awareness. Combining yoga poses and breathing exercises (pranayama) can help to improve posture and alignment and address asymmetries in the body. It can help to release muscles that are tight on one side and strengthen muscles that are weak on the other side. With regular practice muscle memory will help to realign the body and we generally feel taller and more balanced.

There are various studies correlating yoga to the reduction of stress and anxiety. The relaxation element and breathing techniques help to switch off the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight response) and activate the parasympathetic (rest and digest system). Yoga helps our ability to manage emotions and to self-regulate in stressful situations. Research and studies into back pain and yoga are still few but there is a study which was done by the Boston Medical Centre in 2017 that found that yoga specifically designed for lower back pain can be as safe and effective in easing pain as physiotherapy.

In Yoga for Scoliosis we work on developing breath awareness, lengthening and de-rotating the spine. We work on strengthening the body and core and realigning posture. Because of the nature of scoliosis this approach means that the two sides of the body are usually addressed in a different way, meaning that arm or leg positions could be different from one side of the other or we hold poses longer on one side than the other.

Yoga for children & teenagers

Does that mean that yoga can also be beneficial for my child or teenager?

There are some misconceptions about yoga that yoga is about sitting still for long periods of time or achieve extreme flexibility, which is often an image that is portrayed through social media. You might ask yourself if yoga is really something that children can do? Is it safe? Will they be able to focus?

Yes, they can! Kids yoga classes up to the age of 10 usually introduce children to yoga in a playful way. A big focus is teaching body and breath awareness which will lay the foundations for good postural habits and give them some ways to look after their bodies and mental health.

In yoga classes for pre-teens and teenagers much emphasis will be given to correct alignment and posture and we can work much more in detail on their specific curves. Mindfulness exercises and breathing exercises help to manage emotions and combat stress and children of all ages enjoy them.

Yoga is a low impact and generally safe type of exercise that helps to strengthen the body and increase flexibility. It is non-competitive type of activity and can be very empowering for children as they learn how to help themselves, playing an active part rather than relying on others to fix them.

Some recognised benefits of yoga for children:

- Assists neuromuscular development
- Increases circulation, uptake of oxygen
- Encourages motor development on both sides of the body
- Increases balance, coordination and overall body awareness
- Develops core strength, essential for posture and alignment

- Strengthens the immune system
- Promotes better sleep
- Reduces stress and anxiety
- Relieves tension
- Calms and clears the mind

Children and teenagers with scoliosis might feel insecure about their looks depending on how visible the curvature is, and they might feel anxious about an impending operation. On top of that they have to deal with any other challenges that any child and young adult has to face with pressure in school. Even if they are not suffering from back pain (yet) they might feel generally imbalanced and frustrated. Wanting to be perfect and striving for a certain body image is fuelled by social media and fashion magazines and surrounds teenagers 24/7. There is a lot of pressure to conform especially on teenage girls nowadays.

Yoga can help with a lot during these emotionally destabilising times. Yoga teaches self-acceptance, and self-love and helps us to get out of our minds and into our bodies.

As with any type of exercise there are risks if it is not done correctly so it's important to find a knowledgeable teacher. In Yoga for Scoliosis the teacher will put emphasis on working with your child's unique curvature and symptoms. They will work on releasing tight muscles, gentle movements, encouraging length in the spine and de-rotation, and design a programme that can be followed at home. A 1:1 setting with an experienced teacher is essential to be able to address specific concerns and create a practice that is tailored to their needs.

Group classes can be beneficial in their own way as children thrive in a positive environment and get to enjoy a sense of community.

Whatever option you might feel is most appropriate make sure to do your own research and get your child on board! They will love feeling empowered and having a say in shaping their future health & wellbeing.



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