



Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D.

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National Cancer Institute Supports Yoga Study

Cancer researchers have spent years studying the benefits of Tibetan yoga on cancer treatment side effects. Now they will expand their research, thanks to a \$2.4 million grant from the National Cancer Institute.

The NCI award will fund a large M. D. Anderson clinical trial in which women with [breast cancer](#) who are scheduled to undergo chemotherapy will be randomly assigned to a Tibetan yoga group, a control group that does simple stretching exercises or to a group that receives standard care.

The participants will practice their assigned techniques for seven weeks during the period they are receiving chemotherapy, and then will have five booster sessions over the following six months, says [Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D.](#), principal investigator on the trial and director of M. D. Anderson's [Integrative Medicine Program](#).

Previous studies have shown benefits of yoga for cancer patients receiving traditional western medical treatment, says Cohen, also an associate professor in the Departments of [Behavioral Science](#) and [Palliative Care and Rehabilitation Medicine](#).

Physical and psychological benefits studied

"Cancer and its treatment are associated with considerable distress, impaired quality of life, poor mental health and reduced physical function," Cohen says. "This is particularly true for women with breast cancer who receive multi-modality treatment over an extended period of time.

"For thousands of years, Tibetans have been employing a form of yoga that we think could help reduce treatment-related side effects that accumulate over time in cancer patients."

"Like other types of yoga, Tibetan yoga involves breathing, physical movements and meditation, but it puts greater emphasis on meditation and visualization," says Alejandro Chaoul, Ph.D., the study's co-principal investigator and one of just a few individuals in the United States trained in Tibetan yoga.

An M. D. Anderson study led by Chaoul and Cohen that was published in 2004 in the journal *Cancer* reported that Tibetan yoga led to significant sleep improvements in patients with lymphoma. Another small Tibetan yoga study found women with breast cancer had improvements in cancer-related symptoms and a decrease in disturbing thoughts about their cancer.

The newly funded NCI study will assess the physical and psychological benefits of the yoga program, and will specifically examine such patient lifestyle factors as fatigue and sleep, mental health and distress. Additionally, the study will evaluate cognitive and emotional processing, social networking and interactions, coping and other psychosocial factors, Cohen says.

Yoga could affect patients' immune systems

Although the study is designed to look at improvements in quality of life, it could be that Tibetan yoga offers health benefits as well, Cohen says.

"Theoretically, if the Tibetan yoga intervention is found to decrease patients' stress levels, it could have an impact on their immune system," Cohen says. "There is extensive evidence showing that stress suppresses cell-mediated immunity, a component of the immune system involved in tumor surveillance. Tibetan yoga also might have an impact on patients' hormonal activity."

Tibetan teachings are closely followed

Most of what is known about yoga in the West is Hatha yoga, which comes from the Indian tradition, but Cohen, who has practiced Hatha yoga, has chosen to study yogic practices from Tibet.

However, Cohen and his colleagues are also studying the benefits of Hatha yoga for women with

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breast cancer undergoing radiation treatment. Kavita Chandwani, M.D., is a yoga instructor and the co-investigator overseeing this research in collaboration with India's largest yoga research institution, Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (research foundation) in Bangalore, India. (See [related story](#).)

Cohen and his team were the first to design pilot studies that examined the benefits of Tibetan yoga for people with cancer. Chaoul worked with Cohen to create the M. D. Anderson yoga studies and has been closely supervised by his Tibetan teachers to make sure the yoga will be taught in the original tradition as much as possible.

One such advisor, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, a trained Tibetan yoga master in the Bon-Buddhist tradition and founder of the Ligmincha Institute, says, "These practices have long been considered beneficial for health, well-being and spiritual development, and we have always been interested in bringing this ancient knowledge into the area of modern scientific proof."