Why AFib Patients Should Be Doing Yoga

by ANGELA FINLAY

The Extraordinary Benefits of Yoga for AFib

Atrial fibrillation (AFib) is a frightening condition, but huge gains have been made in treatment over the past few decades. Today, there are plenty of medications designed to bring your heart rhythm back down to a healthy level, and many people live perfectly comfortable lives after a single catheter ablation or once they find the right drug for their body.

However, AFib recurrence continues to be a big problem, and without some smart lifestyle changes, it can be difficult to overcome the discomfort. Fortunately, complementary therapies have also made a big impact in AFib management, and yoga is at the head of the pack.

What Yoga Can Do for Your Heart

Yoga may seem like a simple exercise routine, but it's more complex than that. An ancient practice that has been used to rejuvenate, heal, and energize the body, yoga is no longer a health trend — it's a proven cardiovascular therapy.

One recent study published in the *Journal of Thoracic Disease* that followed 52 AFib patients found that a regular yoga practice brought a significant decrease in symptomatic and non-symptomatic AFib episodes, as well as a reduction in blood pressure and heart rate. Ultimately, patients felt less anxious, less depressed, and less symptomatic than they had before starting the yoga program.

What is it about yoga that works so well for AFib patients? As it turns out, there are a few key physiological improvements that come with a regular yoga practice.

Body Rhythm Connections

The human body has different rhythms (like brain waves, heartbeat, and breath), and though it's natural to think of them as separate, they are actually interconnected. If you've ever noticed how a deep breath can calm you down, you'll realize certain actions can impact other physiological reactions.

And while you may not be able to *think* your heart rate back down to normal, you may be able to *breathe* it into a healthier zone.

In yoga, breath is just as important as movement, and you can augment your breath to slow down (or fire up) your metabolism. Rather than trying to push yourself through a powerful routine, concentrate on meditative yoga practices that allow you space and energy to focus on even, controlled breathing.

You'll notice right away that how you choose to breathe will affect your heartbeat, and that is an empowering discovery.

Yoga Relieves Stress

You've likely heard it before, but it deserves to be said again: yoga is an incredible stress relief.

Of course, there are different types of yoga, and each can bring different results, but a hatha, yin, or gentle vinyasa practice is your gateway to calmer thoughts, less anxiety, and even moods — and all of these reduce your chances of experiencing another AFib episode.

When you learn to focus your mind and clear away distractions, you will find your worries fade into the distance. Yoga has been shown to decrease sympathetic nervous system activity, which lowers your resting heart rate.

It has also been shown to decrease oxidative stress and inflammation, an important step toward healthier cardiovascular function.

Breathing Techniques Help Anytime, Anywhere

Since so many things can trigger an AFib episode, it's important to keep a number of tools at your fingertips to stifle problems before they start. Breathing exercises certainly help you move through your exercise routine more fluidly, but they can have an enormous impact on life off the yoga mat, too.

Next page: how to choose the right yoga practice for you.

What Yoga Can Do for Your Heart

You might have heard about guided visualization or progressive relaxation to calm your nerves. A yoga practice brings in both of these approaches, through an array of relaxing movements (asanas) and breath work (pranayamas) to help you focus your mind and learn to let go of your muscle tension.

After a few weeks of practicing, these techniques will become much more natural, and you'll be able to call upon them in any stressful situation.

How to Choose the Right Yoga Practice

When you live with AFib, the key to a healthy exercise routine is respecting your limits. Hot yoga, power yoga, and any ultra-fast vinyasa is probably a bad idea. Instead of pushing your flexibility and cardiovascular fitness, you'll want to explore your physical and mental control — and that's not as easy as it sounds.

Still and relaxing poses might not challenge every muscle group, but they can be some of the most difficult for the mind. Keeping good form in downward dog, cat/cow, and even savasana (corpse pose) will demand focus and restraint, which can take some time to master, but will help you slow your heart rather than speed it up.

Yogic breathing is always a good place to begin. Here are a few effective methods to help your AFib:

Ujjayi Breath

You'll know if you're doing this breath right when you hear your inhale and exhale. First, you gently contract the muscles at the back of your throat to narrow your airway a bit and breathe in slowly, then exhale to the same count while you feel your breath push against your throat, and repeat.

It can feel funny at first, but you'll soon find it's calming and invigorating at the same time.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Using the thumb and finger of one hand, you'll block one nostril at a time while you breathe into the other nostril.

First, cover your right nostril with your right thumb, then breathe in deeply through your left nostril. Exhale out of your right nostril as you block your left nostril with your ring finger.

Now, keeping your finger where it is, breathe in through your right nostril, remove your finger, then breathe out of your left nostril. Repeat this process several times.

Three-Part Breathing

In this exercise, you fill up your lungs bit by bit. First, you inhale a third of your lung capacity, then hold your breath for a moment. Then inhale another third, holding for a couple of seconds before inhaling the last third.

Hold your breath at the top of your inhale, then start to exhale the same way: one third, then hold, then another third, then hold, and then the last third. The object is to massage your torso with your structured breath.

When you’re ready to move into physical yoga postures, be sure to start slowly, and try to work with a trained instructor or guide for the first few sessions to make sure you’re on the right track. Form is important, but so is patience, especially when you have AFib.

Don’t expect too much of yourself, and try to enjoy your practice as much as possible. If you stick with it, you’ll begin to see results before you know it.