

# Feature Article

## Yoga Therapy Referral Guidelines for Healthcare Practitioners

By Timothy McCall, Leigh Blaznik, Subodh Tiwari, John Kenner, and Loren Fishman

The number of people practicing yoga continues to grow rapidly. Yoga therapy is also becoming more popular both in healthcare and community settings, increasing numbers of yoga therapists are being trained, and the evidence base in support of yoga therapy continues to grow. In fact, many healthcare providers are aware of the benefits yoga can bring patients, yet some remain unsure of how to include yoga in the treatment plan, the nature of a yoga therapy consultation—or even how to refer a patient to a yoga therapist—and what to expect from yoga therapy. Yoga therapists, in turn, may be unsure how to interact with the medical profession. This article is intended to advise both interested clinicians and the yoga therapists they interact with.

### What is Yoga Therapy?

Yoga therapy is the use of various yoga practices, such as poses, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and meditation—to help people with a wide variety of health conditions, both physical and psychological. It can be a useful adjunct to medical care or, in some cases, can be used in place of conventional approaches like drug therapy or surgery.

Yoga therapy is often done through individual consultation. In this way it is similar to other healthcare modalities. However, yoga therapy can also be provided in group settings in which participants have a similar condition and/or seek similar therapeutic outcomes. In one-on-one settings, the level of assessment can be detailed, allowing for a tailored treatment plan to suit the client. In group yoga therapy sessions, however, the level of assessment is generally limited and the treatment plan less individual. In either case, the yoga practices may be modified to make them safer or more accessible to clients who may be frail or have contraindications.

Since the patients themselves must do the practices to gain any benefits, all that is required for successful yoga therapy is

that they be conscious and willing to take part. Otherwise, patients with virtually any medical condition, whether bedridden or ambulatory, can do suitably adapted yoga

practices. However, if the referring physician is knowledgeable about yoga therapy, the prescription may specifically describe and/or contraindicate practices.

Therapist: your approach will be extremely safe. The strenuousness of these practices is tailored to each student. Beyond medical conditions, the yoga therapist may also take the client's overall level of fitness, stamina, frailty, and specific needs and desires for therapeutic outcomes.

Typically, private yoga therapists conduct the following:

1. Conducting an intake interview and/or reviewing an intake form (along with reports from healthcare practitioners that include current treatment modalities)
2. Assessing the current health condition based on yoga therapy principles
3. Identifying and addressing the presenting condition from the yoga therapy perspective
4. Setting priorities and goals through systematic consultation with client
5. Developing and implementing the yoga therapy program, which may include dietary and lifestyle advice

### What to Look for in a Referral

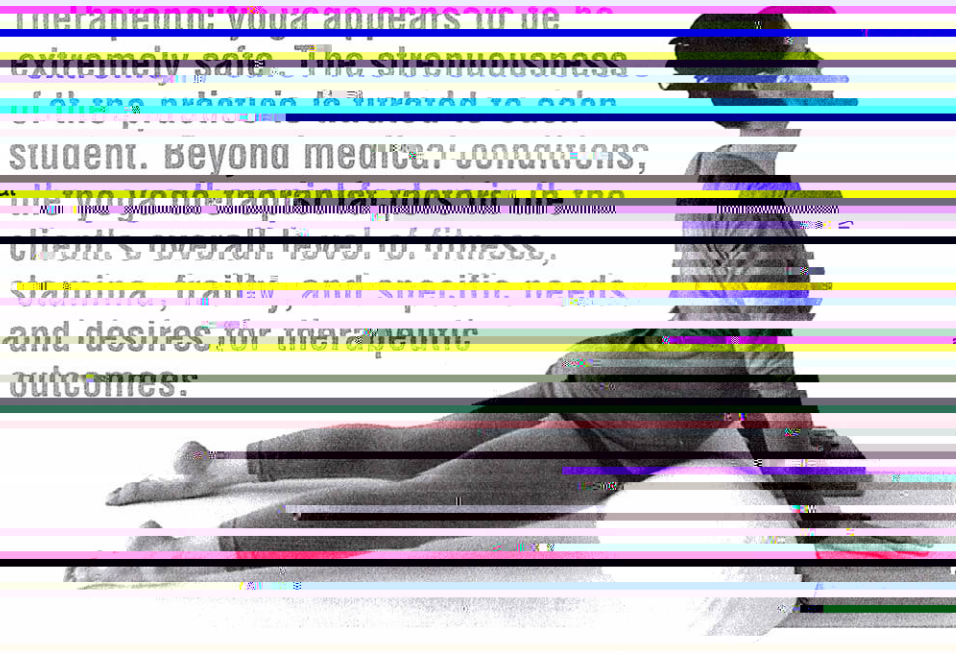
A yoga therapy prescription by a physician (or other healthcare professional) looks much like a physical or occupational therapy referral. It should include diagnosis, goals of therapy, contraindications, and conditions that the patient may or might

have that might be contraindications.

When advising patients, it is important to differentiate between a general yoga class conducted by a yoga teacher and a yoga therapy referral. A yoga teacher is a generalist who works with a wide range of people, while a yoga therapist is a specialist who works with people who have specific health conditions. When referring patients to a yoga therapist, it is important to consider their training, competence, experience, willingness and ability to communicate, and responsiveness.

### Where to Find a Yoga Therapist

Although yoga therapists are not widely recognized, there are several organizations that can help you find a yoga therapist. The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) is a global organization of yoga therapists. The Australian Association of Yoga Therapists (AAAYT) is a national organization of yoga therapists in Australia and New Zealand. The International Yoga Therapy Federation (IYTF) is a global organization of yoga therapists. The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) also maintains a list of yoga therapists on its website. In the latter part of 2016, a listing of yoga therapists was published by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT).



tion of yoga therapists (IAYT), should be available on the IAYT website.

Although yoga therapists do receive some education in basic biomedical terminology and pathophysiology and may further educate themselves to communicate better with healthcare providers, simplicity on the part of the healthcare provider when making referrals is highly desirable. Complex reports should be summarized in basic language. Patients may be more likely to make an appointment with a yoga therapist and commit to the advice given if their healthcare practitioner provides a specific referral, rather than simply advising the patient to seek out a yoga therapist.

Yoga therapy usually involves a number of consultations with the yoga therapist. Follow-up sessions allow the therapist to enter the plan, make sure what the student has been practicing is being done in an appropriate way, and to address any new concerns that may have arisen in the interim. In the process of working, the therapist will sometimes determine that the program as planned is not quite right and will make modifications. Whenever possible, details of the yoga evaluation and plan should be shared with the referring clinician.

Yoga therapy consultations are typically several days to a few weeks apart, and the client is provided with a program of yoga therapy recommendations to practice (at home, work, or elsewhere). The program may be written, photographed, or provided as a series of audio recordings to support the patient. Many clients have three or four consultations over the course of several months. In some instances, a healthcare practitioner and yoga therapist may believe that a patient is best served by regular therapeutic sessions, possibly meeting once a week or every other week for months.

When yoga therapy is being contemplated, it is very important to consider what other treatments may already be part of the treatment plan. For example, a patient may be receiving physical therapy for a musculoskeletal injury, part of which includes prescribed stretching. The yoga therapy component of the program may need to take into these stretches to be sure the program does not irritate or over-load or overwork of a body part. Therefore, in yoga therapy referrals, be sure to mention what else is being done.

### Interactions of Medication and Yoga Therapy Practices

Referring clinicians and yoga therapists

need to be aware of the potential interactions of yoga practice and drug therapy. For example, diuretics as well as many drugs with a potential to lower blood pressure increase the risk of hypotension, which could increase the risk of dizziness or fainting, and could potentially lead to falls. Anticoagulants increase the risk of bleeding in the event of a fall, which would alter what a therapist would recommend.

It is not uncommon that a patient may begin to practice yoga regularly, and if a gradual decrease in blood pressure generally happens but could occur sooner if the student ramps up their practice suddenly. The greatest risks in regard are drugs that lower blood pressure, such as angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, ACE inhibitors, and beta-blockers, respectively. Hypotension may focus their serial patient evaluation on these possibilities and advise them to be alert to the referring physician if changes are detected or symptoms are noted.

If the patient takes analgesics, such as nonsteroidal drugs, for arthritis or another painful condition, the analgesic may be unable to enter the body in sufficient quantities to be optimal during yoga. Any exercise-related injury can potentially lead to an acute attack in these individuals. If patients are on any blood-thinning agents, advise them to use it approximately 30 minutes before starting their practice.

### Contraindications and Cautions for Yoga Therapy

As with all healthcare practices, the safety of yoga therapy is a concern. The scope of yoga, as opposed to general yoga classes, is practiced in a variety of ways and appears to be extremely safe. In contrast to most classes, in yoga therapy, the strenuousness of the practice is titrated to each student. Beyond medical conditions, the yoga therapist evaluates the client's overall level of fitness, strength, flexibility, and other needs and designs for therapeutic outcomes.

The nature of yoga therapy is a holistic mind-body practice, therefore, there are no overall contraindications to yoga therapy, per se. Not all yoga therapy practices are the same. Some practices are used as part of treatment strategies. It involves providing only what the student is able to do, and it is the practitioner's

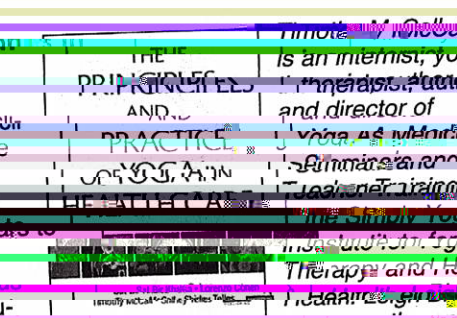
responsibility to refer to yoga therapists.

Some of the contraindications that seem to be contraindications for yoga therapy are: acute or severe trauma, individual conditions that may be exacerbated by yoga, and certain eye conditions. For example, glaucoma is a condition that may be exacerbated by yoga. Both the referring clinician and the yoga therapist should be aware of this. For example, in a patient with glaucoma, the yoga therapist could be advised to avoid any practice that increases intraocular pressure.

### Healthcare Providers

A common challenge in yoga therapy is patient control. A referring clinician may help motivate patients to continue with a yoga program. It is also important that patients be reminded that yoga is usually an adjunctive approach and that they should continue with their other treatments under the care of their healthcare practitioner. It is the responsibility of both the yoga therapist and the referring clinician to reinforce this message.

Adapted from *The Principles and Practice of Yoga Therapy* by Dr. Timothy J. Miller, PhD, and Dr. Judith Miller, PhD. Copyright 2008 by Yoga Therapy Center, Inc.



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