

## Aqua Yoga for Arthritis

What is arthritis? Simply put, arthritis is joint inflammation. There are more than 100 types and it affects people of every age<sup>1</sup>. More than 1 in 5 Americans lives with arthritis so these people are coming to your pools. The Arthritis Foundation has done a lot to raise awareness about the benefits of aquatics for people with arthritis and the latest research continues to show that as well. For example, this year Kars, et al<sup>2</sup> showed significant reductions in pain and stiffness, and improvements in physical function for people with osteoarthritis from an 8-week aquatics program.

Unfortunately, there hasn't been any research done on aqua yoga, and there isn't a lot of awareness about the field within the aquatics or yoga communities. Aqua yoga can be described as simply as performing yoga postures while in a pool. Most qualified aqua yoga teachers also include best practices from aquatics, and these applied aquatics principles are what differentiates aqua yoga from land yoga. This blending of aquatic principles with yoga philosophy and the full eight limbs of yoga, means that aqua yoga classes are a whole person aquatics experience. The whole person focus is what differentiates aqua yoga from other styles of aquatics whether the practitioner has arthritis or not.

The real power of aqua yoga for arthritis is not in any particular exercise but in the philosophy of yoga. Aqua yoga doesn't necessarily have different stretches, strength exercises, or timing than other aquatic modalities. We ask people to do things with their bodies with a different attitude than in aerobics and that has some real benefits for people with arthritis.

In yoga we ask people to get curious. We ask people to go through a series of movements while encouraging them to stay out of pain. If a person has arthritis in their elbow, bending their elbow with a barbell in their hand might not hurt once or twice but it might hurt when they hit the eighth time. Tomorrow is it going to be the eighth time or the sixth? More than having to perform the action a certain number of times or at a certain tempo, it's about what a student can learn about themselves.

In yoga we ask people to be fully present. There's not a lot of chatting in an aqua yoga class. There's just too much going on, and no bandwidth left for talking. I have yet to meet a person who can be fully in touch with their internal state, maintain awareness of their breath, and stand on one foot while carrying on a conversation with the person next to them.

In yoga we ask people to connect. We ask them to get curious with the parts of their body they take for granted, like their feet and their breath. That curiosity usually leads to a better awareness of what is going on in their body in any given second. Once that awareness is there, they can connect an action and response, such as what happens to their breath when their feet are not grounded.

This self awareness, of both what's going on with oneself physically, mentally and emotionally is huge for people with arthritis. Virtually all forms of arthritis come with some form of chronic pain. Chronic pain varies amongst individuals of course, but the same person can experience their pain differently day to day. Empowering people to get to know their pain, and some of the other pain coping strategies practiced in yoga, has been shown to increase coping skills and reduce pain perception in people with arthritis.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to other aquatics modalities there are some benefits and limitations for aqua yoga.

Aqua yoga is very low impact. Most aquatic exercise classes are considered low impact, but some can still have enough movement that people with arthritis can have their joints aggravated. Even a vigorous aqua yoga practice is still almost no impact and eliminates that potential for joint pain or damage.

Aqua yoga is also slow. Even a fast aqua yoga practice is slower than a land yoga practice, or a fast paced aquatics class. Arthritic joint damage can cause joint instability. The joint doesn't have the stability it once did and it can buckle or give people the sensation of their joint 'giving out'. Since aqua yoga is slow, practitioners rarely push themselves hard enough to have a joint buckle, and potentially trip or aggravate a joint.

A down side for people with arthritis is that aqua yoga is not a cardio workout. People with autoimmune forms of arthritis have double the risk for heart problems compared to the general population so heart health is important<sup>4</sup>. Clients with RA may need a reminder on that point since they might be used to the workout load of land yoga or aqua aerobics and aqua yoga is not an exact substitute.

Water temperature can also be a limiting factor. Most pools open to the public are multi-use pools and might be kept at temperatures better suited to swimming or fast paced aquatics. Cold water can bring on a flare for people with auto immune forms of arthritis, or it can aggravate osteo arthritis pain. For people with arthritis, aqua yoga in these cooler temperature pools might need to include thermal pool wear, a faster pace, or a shorter duration.

Also, closing or opening a class with a meditation when people are cold is hijacking their nervous system<sup>5</sup>. Being cold is stimulating, meditation is calming. Clearly those are opposing and not the intended effect. In cooler pools, do an active/warming activity before meditating or offer meditation positions which keep people warmer so that clients can achieve the stress reducing benefits of meditation.

Aqua yoga for arthritis can be summarized with the common quote, "People may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel." Aqua yoga makes people feel better despite arthritis, and that's what counts.

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Christa Fairbrother is a US based yogi who's been practicing for over 25 years. Her experiences with autoimmune diseases inspired her to teach yoga professionally. She works primarily with people with AI diseases and musculoskeletal challenges. Every day she sees how aqua yoga allows people to start and maintain their yoga practices despite health issues. Her basic needs include tea and books. She reaches out to the world at [www.beecontentyoga.com](http://www.beecontentyoga.com)

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<sup>1</sup> CDC [https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data\\_statistics/arthritis-related-stats.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data_statistics/arthritis-related-stats.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [Aquatic Exercise Program for Individuals With Osteoarthritis: Pain, Stiffness, Physical Function, Self-Efficacy](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Mindful Yoga Pilot Study Shows Modulation of Abnormal Pain Processing in Fibromyalgia Patients](#)

<sup>4</sup> Arthritis Foundation <https://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/comorbidities/heart-disease/>

<sup>5</sup> Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inner-source/201407/cold-splash-hydrotherapy-depression-and-anxiety>