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Q: What is yoga?

A: The practice of yoga originated in India thousands of years ago. Traditionally, the practice of yoga encompasses ethical living, spiritual practice, physical activity, breathing exercises, and meditation (Cramer, Lauche, Langhorst, & Dobos, 2013). In the United States, yoga has become a popular mind-body intervention, promoted to improve both physical and mental well-being. Various types of yoga are practiced, characterized by different emphases on aerobic exercise, stretching, alignment, and mindfulness. The most commonly practiced type of yoga in America is hatha yoga, which involves physical postures and can include meditation and breathing control (Uebelacker & Broughton, 2016).

Q: What are the potential mechanisms of action underlying yoga?

A: There have been different hypothesized mechanisms by which yoga might potentially influence major depressive disorder (MDD). For instance, yoga may help individuals sustain focus on the present moment, which may exert a positive impact on depressive symptoms such as rumination (Meister & Juckel, 2018; Uebelacker & Broughton, 2016). There is also some preliminary evidence that yoga can increase levels of neurotransmitters, including serotonin and dopamine, which play an important role in MDD (Cramer et al., 2013). Preliminary research suggests that changes in cortisol, brain-derived neurotrophic factor, and heart-rate variability may also be involved in the clinical effect of yoga interventions (Meister & Juckel, 2017; Cramer et al., 2013). At present, however, these mechanisms are supported by limited evidence and are not fully understood.

Q: Is yoga recommended as a treatment for MDD in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A: Yes. The 2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Depressive Disorder gives exercise, which included yoga, a “weak for” recommendation as an adjunct to other evidence-based treatments for depression.

The MHS relies on the VA/DOD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. Recommendations for or against a treatment may be characterized as strong or weak based on a variety of factors (e.g., confidence in the quality of the evidence, weight of treatment benefits versus risks, feasibility). The CPGs also state if there is insufficient evidence to develop a recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q: Do other authoritative reviews recommend yoga as a treatment for MDD?

A: No. Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of yoga for MDD.

Other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using grading systems similar to the VA/DOD CPGs. Notable among these is Cochrane, an international network that conducts high-quality reviews of healthcare interventions.

- Cochrane: No systematic reviews of yoga for depression were identified.

Q: What conclusions can be drawn about the use of yoga as a treatment for MDD in the MHS?

A: Based on the current evidence base, yoga is suggested as an adjunct to other evidence-based treatments for depression in the MHS. The body of evidence included methodological limitations. Adequately powered RCTs are needed to establish the efficacy of yoga as a treatment for MDD. For additional guidance on selecting a treatment for MDD, please visit the PHCoE Clinician Resources section of the intranet and navigate to clinical support tools.

References

Cramer, H., Lauche, R., Langhorst, J., & Dobos, G. (2013). Yoga for depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Depression and Anxiety*, 30(11), 1068–1083.

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Meister, K., & Juckel, G. (2018). A systematic review of mechanisms of change in body-oriented yoga in major depressive disorders. *Pharmacopsychiatry*, 51(3), 73-81.

Uebelacker, L. A., & Broughton, M. K. (2016). Yoga for depression and anxiety: A review of published research and implications for healthcare providers. *Rhode Island Medical Journal*, 99(3), 20–22.