

Qigong Helps Cancer Survivors Reduce Fatigue and Stress

The traditional mind-body practice appears to work as well as more intensive exercise.

July 27, 2023 By [Sukanya Charuchandra](#)

Women cancer survivors who practiced qigong, a traditional Chinese mind-body practice, experienced a decrease in cancer-related fatigue over ten weeks, and the benefits mirrored those seen with higher-intensity exercise, according to study findings published in [Integrative Cancer Therapies](#).

Fatigue is a common, sometimes long-term and potentially debilitating side effect of cancer and its treatment. A variety of integrative, or non-medication-based therapies, such as nutrition, exercise and yoga, have been explored as potential solutions. But few randomized controlled trials have properly assessed the impact of these therapies on cancer-related fatigue.

Stephanie Jones, PhD, of Brown University, and colleagues conducted a randomized controlled pilot trial to compare the effects of qigong to an intervention combining exercise, plant-based nutrition and health education. Developed in China thousands of years ago, [qigong](#) involves gentle stretching exercises along with breathing practices and meditation.

For the study, the researchers included 24 women with lingering cancer-related fatigue. Most were white, and the average age was 57 years. Half had breast cancer, three had uterine or endometrial cancer, three had colorectal cancer and the rest had various other malignancies. They were at least eight weeks past treatment, and the average time since their last treatment was 4.6 years. At baseline, they ranked their fatigue as 3 or higher on a 10-point scale in terms of its disruption of their normal daily activities or sleep quality.

Eleven participants were randomly assigned to practice qigong while 13 were assigned to a standard exercise and nutrition intervention for 10 weeks. Classes were held twice weekly, in two-hour sessions. The research team assessed how fatigue levels, as well as stress and emotional health, changed after the intervention.

Qigong was as effective as high-intensity exercise for lowering cancer-related fatigue. About three quarters of participants in both groups reported more than a 3-point improvement (73% and 77%, respectively). With both interventions, participants experienced improvements that were more than double the established minimal clinically important difference. Women in the qigong group

also reported significant improvements in stress, mood and emotional control, while those in the other group reported significant improvements in sleep and fatigue levels.

“Our study is important because it is the first randomized clinical trial to directly compare qigong practice to the best standards of care for fatigue—namely, exercise,” Jones said in a [press release](#). “It would have been hard to predict that people who perform gentle non-aerobic intentional movements would show the same level of improvement as those who go through moderate strength training and aerobic exercise. It is exciting that our findings establish that this is indeed the case.”

In the future, larger studies with more diverse populations will be needed to better establish the benefits of mind-body interventions like qigong for tackling cancer-related fatigue.

Click here to read the study in [Integrative Cancer Therapies](#).

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