

1. Can I practice yoga with a fused spine?

Yes, you certainly can. Depending on the individual. Many students with fused spines, find that they can do yoga because many beginning yoga postures (like standing poses) require you to fold from the hips rather than the waist, the spine stays in a relatively neutral position. This makes it possible to do yoga even with a fused spine. If you do have a fused spine, first consult with your doctor and then find a qualified teacher. The yoga poses for scoliosis in my "Yoga For Scoliosis" booklet, video, and website are all basic poses and a good place to start in consultation with your medical professional.

2. If my curve is severe and I have not had surgery for it, can I do yoga?

Yes, depending on the individual, you will likely find it helpful to modify some of the postures in consultation with your physician, physical therapist or a certified yoga instructor. Two basic principles can help guide your practice. First, work to elongate the spine and stretch muscles that have become imbalanced. Second, practice postures that strengthen the spine and back. I recommend that you work with an Iyengar-trained teacher who understands proper alignment and ways to modify postures for those with spinal imbalances.

3. How can yoga address these imbalances?

These are common patterns with scoliosis, where the spine both moves laterally (to the side) and also rotates. In the mid-back on the side of the curve, the ribs often rotate toward the back, creating a rounded back. On the opposite side of the curve, the ribs compress and move toward the front of the body. In the lower back on the side of the curve, the pelvis and lower back rotate towards the back. This can create compression in the vertebrae and can cause one hip to be higher. In yoga, we address these imbalances with breath awareness and postures that emphasize alignment and balance.

4. Will yoga help me feel more aligned and centered?

When you first begin yoga, your sense of what is balanced or aligned may be a bit askew. Sometimes in a person with scoliosis what feels aligned is often mis-aligned, and what feels mis-aligned is often balanced alignment. As you continue to practice and your awareness deepens, your body and mind go through a process of what I call "re-mapping," where you begin to refine your sense of inner alignment and balance. The goal is not to make the spine "perfect" but to find one's own center and beauty, just as an oak tree reaches for the sky with its beautiful balance of twists and turns.

5. Does yoga help with the pain?

Yes, although in the beginning you may feel some discomfort as your body readjusts to a new sense of alignment. You may initially feel some soreness in the back as the muscles become more balanced and the body finds its center.

Yoga postures and breathing techniques will help you learn to release muscle tension and relax the body. In addition, practicing the postures with careful alignment will help balance the muscles and bones, taking extra burden off the muscles. My experience is that yoga can help strengthen the muscles that support the spine as well as create traction to lengthen the spine. Also, it can help cosmetically with posture and stabilize the condition. Any pain over an extended period of time should be brought to the attention of your physician.

6. Can yoga help me to decrease my lateral curve?

This depends on your age, degree of scoliosis and dedication. It also depends on whether your scoliosis is functional or structural. With an open mind and a consistent practice, anything is possible. More importantly, my students have found that yoga has given them a tool to cope with scoliosis without depending on a professional to "fix" them. Yoga not only alleviates their pain but also fosters a sense of empowerment. They gain confidence, strength and flexibility not only in your yoga practice but also in their lives.

7. What about getting a massage, being rolfing or seeing a chiropractor?

Any of these practices can be a wonderful complement to the practice of yoga. I have personally found bodywork and chiropractic adjustments very helpful for releasing tightness in the back muscles and aligning the spine.

8. As a teenager, I don't feel any pain even though I have scoliosis. Why should I do yoga?

This is a good question. Though there is no pain, yoga can be a preventive measure. Statistics show that if you have been diagnosed with scoliosis as a teenager, the degree of curvature may increase. My experience is that yoga can help strengthen the muscles that support the spine as well as create traction to lengthen the spine. Also, it can help cosmetically with posture and stabilize the condition.

9. As I get older, it seems that my curvature is getting worse and I have more pain. Can yoga help me and can I begin at any age?

It's never too late to begin yoga. I have students ranging in age from 8 to 80 years old. Students learn which poses to emphasize and how to adapt poses for their particular pattern of scoliosis. Some of the simplest poses are the most effective for pain control. If you take a keen interest in yoga and practice regularly, then you will improve naturally. Yoga has freed me from pain and allowed me to pursue other activities like swimming, cycling and skiing. It has given me the opportunity to live a full and adventurous life.

10. Can yoga be counterproductive, causing injury or even deeper imbalance in my spine?

While any form of yoga can be therapeutic, individuals with scoliosis need to pay careful attention to their bodies' unique needs and practice in ways that

help minimize the body's asymmetries. When practiced without this awareness, yoga can occasionally be counterproductive. This is why I recommend studying with an Iyengar teacher (or other well-trained instructor) who focuses on alignment and can help students make specific adjustments and modifications that support symmetry and balance. Also, it is recommended to consult with your physician before beginning a new type of exercise and bringing any pain to the attention of a physician