

Yoga May Ease Cancer-Related Sleep Problems

HOUSTON, TEXAS, May 24, 2004: A small study suggests yoga can help ease the sleep disruptions that often accompany cancer treatment. Researchers from M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, studied 39 people who were either being treated for lymphoma or had finished their treatment in the past year. Half were assigned to take 7 weeks of Tibetan yoga classes, while the others were given no special intervention. At the end of the study, the patients who did yoga reported falling asleep faster, sleeping better and longer, and using fewer sleep medications than people in the other group. The results were reported in the journal *Cancer* (Vol. 100, No. 10: 2253-2260). "Although there's not a lot out there on sleep in cancer, the few studies there are suggest that sleep is quite disrupted in cancer patients, so to improve a patient's sleep is quite a remarkable thing to have accomplished," said lead researcher Lorenzo Cohen, PhD, director of M.D. Anderson's Integrative Medicine Program. But Cohen wasn't entirely surprised by the results. The yoga may have helped patients sleep by helping them cope with the stress caused by their illness, he said. "Patients undergo a tremendous amount of stress, both from the psychological aspects of dealing with a life-threatening illness and the side effects of treatment," said Cohen. "These types of modalities that incorporate not just physical aspects, but also spiritual and mental aspects, can be useful to help manage a lot of these issues." The stretching and poses in yoga, for instance, can help patients regain some of their physical conditioning and manage fatigue, Cohen said. The breathing and relaxation techniques can help patients deal with intrusive thoughts or fear of recurrence or death. The Tibetan type of yoga used for the study may have been especially helpful, Cohen said, because it combines all of those features: gentle exercise, focused breathing, and meditation. "All of the postures can be done sitting on a chair or on the floor," explained Cohen. "They're all very low-impact, simple movements done when a person is being mindful and working on breath control." The movements can be adapted for people with limited arm or leg mobility, he added. And unlike Hatha yoga, which is more commonly practiced in the United States, the Tibetan program used in the study included no stretching, balancing, or inverted poses that can be problematic for people with cancer. Still, Cohen said, any yoga program that incorporates this mind-body-breathing combination is likely to benefit a cancer patient. But before starting any yoga program, patients should consult their doctor first, he said. People who are having problems with balance, for instance, may want to skip some of the yoga poses that require balancing; patients with bone metastases need to be careful of weight-bearing poses, which could pose a risk of fracture.