



## YOGA AND IBS

*Dana Carroll*

*Yoga practitioner and IBS patient*

In Eastern societies, yoga has been practiced for 5000 years. One of the reasons it has lasted is that it works. In the United States, we are just beginning to discover the benefits of this ancient practice. Yoga, in many forms, is becoming almost commonplace. There are too many varieties and "offshoots" to count. In some of the newer adaptations, the core of the practice is being forgotten. Yoga must have its foundation in the breath. We are born knowing how to breathe; nobody teaches us this "skill". As we learn and grow, we are taught many things. Among these are, how to succeed at whatever we attempt, how to fit more and more into our lives, how to balance those lives when they are overfull. All of these things can, and do, add stress to our lives. When we are under stress, the diaphragm freezes and we develop shallow breathing. This often happens outside of our conscious awareness. Over time, this shallow breathing comes to feel natural and normal to us. If we have not taken yoga, or in some other manner been reminded how to breathe correctly, we may not be aware of how we breathe or how to correct our breathing.

Yoga teaches us to breathe as babies do, into our abdomen. As a result, the breathing process slows and deepens. With these slow, deep breaths comes a calmness and serenity that is unavailable otherwise. While breathing in this manner, poses are assumed. These poses open up our bodies in a way that allows energy and calm to travel throughout our systems. This is helpful to all parts of the body and will improve overall health and specific problems. For example, medical studies in Europe have shown that people who practice breathing diaphragmatically have fewer heart attacks. Those who have had heart attacks and learn to practice diaphragmatic breathing have fewer reoccurrences of heart attacks.

The positive effects of the combination of yoga poses and correct breathing is almost immediately apparent. The beginning yoga student may feel a bit awkward at first, since we are not accustomed to functioning in this healthy manner. New students, however, very quickly settle into the routine and soon reap the benefits of their practice. Those practicing yoga on a regular basis notice additional calmness and energy in their lives. Their attitudes start becoming more positive, and their overall sense of well being improves. If they stop practicing for any reason, these positive aspects begin to decline. When looking for the right yoga class for you to take, be sure to speak with the instructor and let them know your yoga skill level (it's important for them to know if you have never practiced yoga and it's important for you to know if the classes they teach are at a beginner's level). Be sure

they are not just teaching an exercise class that has "yoga like poses". While these may be helpful, they won't be as effective as classes that include awareness of your breath. Many hospital affiliated rehabilitation facilities have incorporated yoga classes or may be able to refer you to a qualified yoga instructor. Stress is an important influencing factor for IBS patients. All who suffer from it agree that when stress increases, so do the IBS symptoms. That, in turn, saps the energy from the patient. Practicing yoga will initially help lessen the existing symptoms, and, if practiced regularly, will result in less frequent and intense occurrence IBS. A bonus is that there will be no undesired side-effects, as can be possible when medication is required.

*(The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center.)*