

Yoga Therapy for Postural Improvement in Idiopathic Scoliosis

Many adults with idiopathic scoliosis are searching for alternatives to surgery or bracing, and Yoga Therapy is a transformative, accessible approach. The aim of this Guru Kula presentation is to explore how Yoga Therapy can improve posture and spinal alignment in adults with idiopathic scoliosis. As a Yoga Therapy Candidate, my intention with this research is to create an extensive article on how therapeutic movement and awareness practices can address structural imbalances, improve posture, and cultivate more ease for those affected by scoliosis. It's significant to me because my sister has scoliosis, and I want to explore the ways in which Yoga Therapy, as a conglomeration of many techniques, can support her. This topic matters because millions of people live with scoliosis, and Yoga Therapy offers a path to relief and support.¹



Scoliosis is an abnormal curvature of the spine. While Figure 1 depicts a healthy spine,² scoliotic curvature of the spine pulls the torso in a particular direction, so the body compensates by developing asymmetric muscle strength. As a result, people affected by scoliosis can experience pain and discomfort because some muscles are working harder than others, and much more so than they were ever intended to.

Further, people with Scoliosis have poorly developed posture, which affects breathing and has been linked with negative effects on mental health.³ Regarding current treatments, most people with scoliosis do not require treatment, as it can be monitored closely to ensure it isn't worsening. A doctor may recommend an orthopedic brace, such as in Figure 2,⁴ to prevent further curvature. In some cases, spinal fusion surgery may be needed to straighten and stabilize the spine.⁵ Each approach has its effectiveness and limitations, with each case and individual's health history being unique.

The primary focus of this research is exploring scoliosis through the lens of Yoga Therapy in ways to maintain and potentially improve spinal alignment, with secondary focuses on postural awareness, proprioception, and overall well-being. I aim to investigate practices that address structural imbalances and offer insights into the clinical benefits of Yoga Therapy. Practices that maintain spinal alignment and potentially improve it by a measurable degree are major areas to focus on with scoliosis, yet equally important are the holistic aspects of Yoga Therapy that takes into account the person as a whole and considers the mind-body-soul connection. Bill Reif, a physical therapist, yogi, and author of *The Back Pain Secret: The Real Cause of Women's Back Pain and How to Treat It*, believes that yoga can be a valuable part of the treatment for scoliosis. "Yoga can help foster the self-awareness—and the strength and flexibility—that make it possible to improve the alignment of the spine, which can in turn minimize pain and possibly respiratory issues, too," Reif says.⁶ With physical therapists and other medical professionals like Bill Reif writing books on yoga for back pain, yoga is becoming a well-known holistic health science. This is good news for people who are affected by scoliosis because more widely available resources for yoga focused on scoliosis can in turn help benefit more of the population. Studies have shown that yoga is an acceptable and safe intervention, which may result in clinically relevant improvements in pain and functional outcomes associated with a range of musculoskeletal conditions.⁷



Figure 2



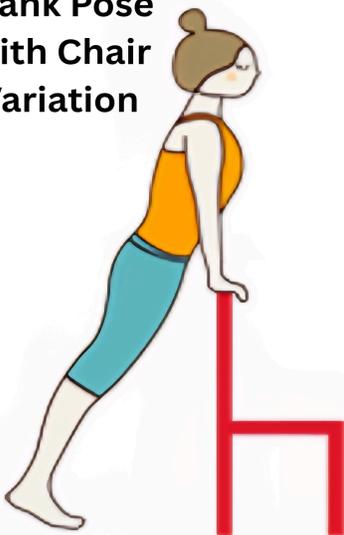
Figure 3

Dr. Loren Fishman is a very notable figure in the field of evidence-based Yoga Therapy. He is pictured in Figure 3 practicing a Side Plank Pose. His study found that asymmetrically strengthening the convex side of the primary curve with daily practice of the side plank pose held for as long as possible for an average of 6.8 months significantly reduced the angle of primary scoliotic curves.⁸ Dr. Fishman's studies are very

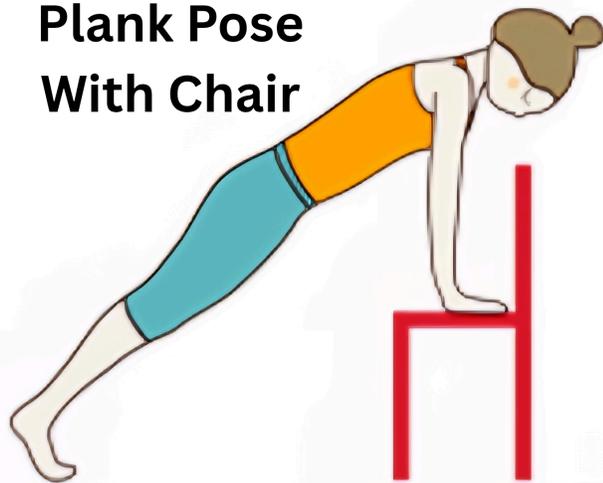
significant in this field because they provide clinical evidence supporting one of the objectives that Yoga Therapy can improve spinal alignment by a measurable degree. However, not all yoga postures will be therapeutic for people affected by scoliosis. There are certain postures to avoid, so it is important to work with a yoga therapist who understands the condition. In fact, it is beneficial for both the student and the teacher to understand scoliosis and its implications when developing a personalized yoga therapy plan.

In general, when working with scoliosis, all asana, pranayama, meditation, and lifestyle tools should be individualized based on the client, and all practices be evidence-based if possible. Some of Dr. Fishman's work promotes asymmetrical strengthening of the core, but the main takeaway is that it is crucial for people affected by scoliosis to strengthen the core muscles to support the spine with isometric yoga poses. It is important to work on strengthening the muscles that surround the spine as well as the abdominal or core muscles using asanas such as plank and side plank pose, as described by Dr. Fishman, as pictured in the following images. It is recommended to begin with modifications as shown with the chair variations before moving onto the variations without a chair.

**Plank Pose
With Chair
Variation**



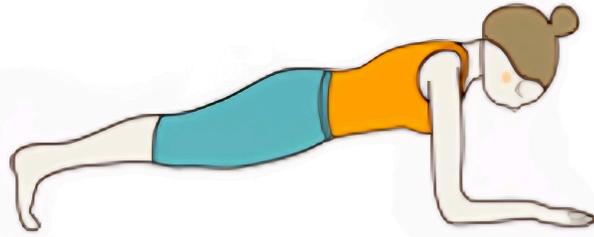
**Plank Pose
With Chair**



**Side Plank
With Chair**



Forearm Plank Pose



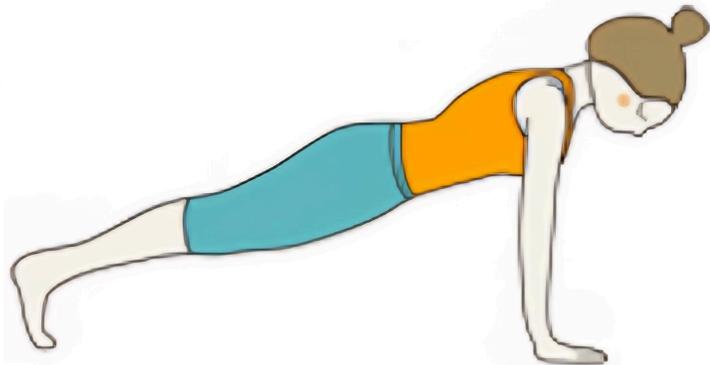
**Forearm
Side Plank**



**Side Plank Pose
Variation (One Knee
On The Floor)**



Plank Pose



**Side Plank
Pose**



In addition to studying the work of Dr. Fishman, I looked into what physical therapists might offer to people affected by scoliosis and found the Schroth Method. Yoga Therapy focuses on individualized, holistic plans, and the Schroth Method aligns with that focus as a well-studied approach that uses Physiotherapy exercises customized for each patient to return the curved spine to a more natural position. In alignment with the goals of Yoga Therapy, the goal of Schroth exercises is to restore muscular symmetry and alignment of posture, breathe into the concave side of the body, and teach postural awareness.⁹ The Schroth Method is often recommended by physical therapists specializing in scoliosis treatment. The Schroth Method aligns with Yoga Therapy in how it takes into account the whole person and their activities of daily living, focusing on posture and fullness of breath. Yoga Therapy often does not look like traditional yoga, so it is important to explore many different whole-body practices that are researched and evidence-based, as in the Schroth Method. The following image is an example of an exercise in the Schroth Method from the article, Physiotherapy Scoliosis-Specific Exercises – A Comprehensive Review of Seven Major Schools.¹⁰ Simple yet effective exercises such as those described in the Schroth Method are reminiscent of yoga postures which is why it is powerful to look at scoliosis through the lens of Yoga Therapy as a conglomeration of healing modalities. For example, incorporating mindfulness practices such as meditation and breath techniques into the Schroth Method exercises is something Yoga Therapy can teach effectively. Mindful breathing holds promise for chronic low back pain management, with studies revealing pain reduction and improved quality of life.¹¹ The Schroth Method also describes breathing practices or pranayama as it is known in Yoga Therapy. The most popular breath technique in the Schroth Method is Rotation Angular Breathing (RAB), also called orthopaedic breathing. It is a unique breathing technique that helps expand the ribs from inside the rib cage by pushing the ribs sideways and backwards, and helps return the vertebrae closer to their normal, untwisted position.¹² People without scoliosis can fall into unhealthy breathing patterns as it is, so it is important to teach breath as a movement practice when working with scoliosis. Movement and breathwork practices are key for the physical aspects of spinal health, but it is key for the mental health aspect that individuals with scoliosis are also equipped with meditative and lifestyle tools for a calm mind and body. Meditation practices are a large component of therapeutic yoga for reducing chronic stress, which can accompany scoliosis. Research studies suggest that Loving-Kindness Meditation and Compassion Meditation are highly promising practices for improving positive affect. These meditation exercises are believed to broaden attention, enhance positive emotions, and lessen negative emotional states; they are seen to shift a person's basic view of the self in

relation to others and increase empathy and compassion.¹³ Considering the research, it is easy to see that meditation practice for people who are affected by scoliosis is impactful not only because it is beneficial in times of stress but also in how it cultivates an overall calm nervous system for the individual. While meditation can fall under the umbrella of yoga therapy lifestyle tools, one of the most important lifestyle tools, as described by the Schroth Method, is emphasizing postural awareness throughout the day. As stated in the research article, the Schroth method emphasizes teaching postural corrections throughout the day to change habitual default postures and improve alignment, pain, and progression. The main advantage of this lies in its application to ordinary daily activity to change the asymmetrical loading on the body to decrease progression and pain. This also reduces the amount of time needed to practice the exercises and allows patients to spend more time in leisure activities and to live a normal life.¹⁴ It is a good measure whether or not one is affected by scoliosis to practice awareness of posture and any possible slouching periodically throughout the day. However, the simple practice of making postural corrections throughout the day can be a life-changing lifestyle tool for people affected by scoliosis.

While Yoga Therapy is promising, it can not make any promises. Maintenance and improvements in spinal alignment and posture will require consistent work and commitment, as well as collaboration with other healthcare providers. Yoga therapists can communicate with physicians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and other professionals to collaborate on the most thorough and safe plan tailored to the individual. Through communication with healthcare providers and other yoga therapists, any uncertainty about contraindications or the appropriateness of a particular asana, pranayama, or other yoga therapy tool receives consultation. Any complex physical and psychological presentations are also dealt with under supervision.

Yoga therapy does not replace current allopathic treatments for scoliosis, such as bracing¹⁵, but it is valuable for long-term self-management and stress reduction. There are many different healing modalities that blend well with Yoga Therapy, from allopathic medicine to acupuncture¹⁶. To clarify, Merriam-Webster defines allopathic medicine as a system that emphasizes diagnosing and treating disease and the use of conventional, evidence-based therapeutic measures (such as drugs or surgery). Every body is different, so one method might work well for some and not for others. One study found that a regimen of Iyengar Yoga combined with movement reeducation based on perceptual and motor development from Body-Mind Centering and The Feldenkrais Method may be

very useful in reducing pain and improving the well-being and functional abilities in idiopathic scoliosis regardless of age.¹⁷ The nature of Yoga Therapy is that it's an individualized, adaptive approach to wellness and spinal health. This makes it suitable for varying severities of scoliosis. Yoga Therapy for scoliosis is a way to create space in an individual's life for self-care, emotional regulation, and positive lifestyle changes.

When approached with knowledge and care, Yoga Therapy plays a significant role in enhancing spinal alignment, postural awareness, and overall well-being. Millions affected by scoliosis are seeking non-invasive alternatives, and Yoga Therapy offers a hopeful path to ease. By integrating therapeutic yoga into scoliosis care, we expand the possibilities for long-term support, self-management, and meaningful transformation.



Resources

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Appendix

Linked below is a protocol used for a Yoga Therapy session for Scoliosis.

[Yoga Therapy for Scoliosis](#)