

The Prevalence and Use of Yoga in Australia: a National Survey

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Abstract

There is very little data available on yoga in Australia. What information we have comes from studies into sport and physical activities or into complementary therapies. This is at a time when yoga is experiencing growth, both in popularity as a form of exercise and in acceptance as a therapy for a range of medical conditions including heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, and arthritis. Yoga in Australia will break new ground by conducting a landmark 'web-based' survey of yoga teachers and yoga participants nationwide to establish the prevalence and use of yoga in Australia.

Yoga in Australia – what we know

We know that yoga is marginally more popular than Australian Rules football. Based on participation rates published in 2003 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [1], 311,000 people had participated in yoga in the previous 12 months compared to 307,900 for Aussie Rules (see Table 1). From the same data we also know that 85% of yoga participants are women.

Table 1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Most popular sports and physical activities in Australia 2002

Sport / physical activity	% of the population
Walking	25%
Aerobics	11%
Swimming	11%
Golf	7.5%
Tennis	6.8%
Cycling	5.7%
Running	4.6%
Fishing	3.5%
Bushwalking	3.2%
Netball	3.1%
Yoga	2.1%

Overseas, from a study published in 2003 by American Sports Data Inc [2] we also know that participation in "kindler, gentler" forms of exercise like yoga and pilates are experiencing enormous growth and attracting younger, first-time exercise converts, a trend that appears to be mirrored in Australia (Table 2).

Table 2. American Sports Data 2003. Sports Trends

▷	The greatest growth activities in exercise in the US were pilates, elliptical motion trainers (cross trainers), stationery recumbent cycling (exercise bikes) and yoga.
▷	Pilates increased 92% over the 2001 level, with 90% of those women. About 67% were first-year converts to exercise.
▷	Yoga or tai chi increased by 95% over the period 1998 to 2002, yoga with 4.4% of the population, 83% of them female.
▷	The average age of yoga participants declined from 41.5 years in 1998 to 37.1 in 2002. Similarly, the average age of pilates participants declined from 43.6 to 35.1 in just 2 years.

We are also observing that yoga as a therapy, whether in its own right or as part of an integrated approach to medicine, is gaining acceptance amongst the medical profession. A 1998 study of West Australian GP's [3] found that more than 50% of GP's considered the following to be beneficial; acupuncture (90%), meditation (87%), massage (83%), yoga (77%), hypnosis (75%) and chiropractic (57%).

Overseas, the National Centre for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) in the US provided information on yoga as a therapy in its May 2004 report entitled "Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Use Among Adults: United States, 2002" [4]. (see Table 3)

Table 3. NCCAM Report. USA 2004

▷	5.1% of respondents had used yoga as a CAM therapy in the prior 12 months.
▷	7.5% of respondents had 'ever used' yoga as a CAM therapy.
▷	The most common CAM therapy was 'prayer' (for one's own health).
▷	Other than prayer, only natural products, breathing exercises, meditation and chiropractic came ahead of yoga.
▷	CAM (irrespective of therapy) was most commonly used for back, neck or joint pain, indicating that yoga is still primarily used as a musculoskeletal therapy.

Another US study published in 2004 entitled, “Use of mind body medical therapies” [5], found that meditation, imagery, and yoga were the most commonly used CAM techniques. Used by 20% of those with chronic pain and 13% of those with insomnia, conditions for which consensus panels have concluded that mind-body therapies are effective. However the authors concluded, “they were also used by less than 20% of those with heart disease, headaches, back or neck pain, and cancer, conditions for which there is strong research support”.

Taking heart disease as an example, there have been a number of studies supporting yogic lifestyle in the management and treatment of coronary artery disease (Table 4).

Table 4. Research conclusions for yoga in the management and treatment of heart disease

▷ The high profile Dean Ornish Lifestyle Heart Trials published in 1990 and 1998 [6,7], demonstrated that comprehensive lifestyle changes based around the principles of integral yoga “could bring about regression of severe coronary atherosclerosis after one year and further regression after five years”.
▷ In a 2001 clinical trial in India entitled “Retardation of coronary atherosclerosis with yoga lifestyle intervention” [8], the authors concluded that “yoga lifestyle intervention increased the regression of coronary heart disease”.
▷ In a systematic review of randomized clinical trials of yoga therapy for heart disease published in 2003 [9], the authors reported that “yoga practiced as a holistic discipline is beneficial for the prevention and treatment of heart disease”.
▷ In a US study of the rehabilitation of postmyocardial infarction patients in 2003 [10], the author found that “the most commonly used complementary therapies were meditation and yoga”.

Despite that yoga as part of an integrative medicine approach in the treatment of heart disease is strongly supported by current research, anecdotal evidence gained from talking to yoga teachers suggests that there is currently little uptake of yoga by heart disease patients in Australia in the management their condition. The same appears to be true for some of the other medical conditions for which yoga has been shown to be beneficial, like asthma, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, and arthritis.

The available data seems to indicate that yoga is seen by the general public as a form of exercise, beneficial for ‘wellness’ but limited as a therapy to musculoskeletal conditions, ie: good for back pain. This raises questions such as:

- ▷ *Is this just the ‘lag’ effect – the time it takes for research evidence to become public knowledge?*

- ▷ *Is this because yoga teachers are not aware of, or have not developed practical applications for, the research evidence?*
- ▷ *Is this because ‘western yoga’ is often presented as exercise class rather than a holistic lifestyle?*

What we don’t know

We don’t know why people currently choose to practise yoga, why they choose one type of yoga over another, why they stop practicing yoga or why yoga doesn’t appeal equally to men. For example, we don’t know what is attracting the new generation of younger, first-time yoga participants. We also don’t know the co-factors contributing to a person’s choice to practise yoga such as their socio-economic background or their use of other exercise or therapies.

The Yoga in Australia survey will address these questions by establishing the extent and type of yoga use and the medical condition, health concern or exercise reason for which it is used, along with the expected and received benefits or otherwise of yoga practice.

In addition to demographic data like age, sex, occupation, education level, income bracket and geographic location, we plan to ask questions of yoga participants and teachers like those in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Sample questions for yoga participants

▷ When did you start practising yoga? Why did you start? Are you still practicing yoga? If not, why did you stop?
▷ What short term / long term benefits do you receive from your yoga practice?
▷ Are you practicing yoga to address a specific medical condition or for health reasons?
▷ What style (lineage) of yoga do you practice - if known? Why did you choose this style of yoga?
▷ What techniques do you use in your yoga practice, ie: asana, pranayama, kriya, bandha, trataka, mantra, meditation?
▷ Have you suffered an injury practicing yoga? If so was it a recurrence of a previous (non yoga) injury? Where did it happen (at home or in class), and what did it cost in time and money to heal?
▷ What other physical activities or complementary therapies do you also use? How do these integrate with your yoga practice?
▷ How often do you practice and for how long? Do you practice yoga at home or at a yoga school?
▷ How much money do you spend on practicing yoga each week/month? What do you spend that money on, ie: classes, clothes, accessories?

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Table 6. Sample questions for yoga teachers

▷	What qualification (or other accreditation) did you obtain to become a yoga teacher? How many hours training did this represent?
▷	When did you start teaching yoga? Why did you start? Are you still teaching yoga? If not, why did you stop?
▷	How many sessions a week do you teach? How many students do you teach each week/month on average?
▷	What further training or qualification have you completed since you became a yoga teacher?
▷	Are you a member of an association of yoga teachers? Why or why not? Are you a member of any other (non yoga) professional associations?
▷	Do you hold professional indemnity or public liability insurance for teaching yoga?
▷	What short term / long term benefits do you receive from your yoga teaching/ practice?
▷	Are you teaching/practicing yoga to address a specific medical condition or for health reasons?
▷	What style (lineage) of yoga do you teach or practice? Why did you choose this style of yoga?
▷	What techniques do you use in your own yoga practice, ie: asana, pranayama, kriya, bandha, trataka, mantra, meditation?
▷	Have you suffered an injury teaching/practicing yoga? If so was it a recurrence of a previous (non yoga) injury? Where did it happen (at home or in class), and what did it cost in time and money to heal?
▷	What other physical activities or complementary therapies do you also use? How do these integrate with your yoga teaching/practice?
▷	What medical conditions or health concerns are being treated by your students? Select from list.

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Breaking new ground

Yoga in Australia is breaking new ground by conducting the survey entirely on the ‘web’ using on-line data collection techniques. Internet delivery makes a survey of this magnitude (with thousands of potential participants) cost effective and therefore possible for the first time along with other benefits of web technology. For example, survey participants will be able to request that they automatically receive a copy of the survey results by email when published.

The questions will be ‘interactive’ in the sense that the answer to certain questions will determine the set of questions that follow. While the statistical questions will collect demographic and socio-economic data, the ‘experiential’ questions will allow yoga teachers and their students to describe their motivations and experiences of yoga.

When will this happen?

Between August and October 2004, yoga teachers across Australia will be invited to visit the website to participate in an on-line ‘discussion forum’ to determine the topics to be canvassed by the survey (see Table 7). The yoga teacher associations will also be invited to take a leading role in submitting questions for the survey on behalf of their members.

Then, between February and April 2005, the actual survey will take place. All yoga teachers (and their students) will be invited to visit the website to complete the survey. A media launch will also be sought to invite members of the general public who practise yoga to visit the website.

Finally, between August and October 2005, the final report will be published. It is expected that the findings will be reported in the mainstream media bringing public attention to the benefits of yoga for various medical conditions, and increasing awareness in the yoga community, the general public and amongst health care professionals.

Table 7. Yoga in Australia – Project Timeframe

	2004			2005		
	May – July	Aug – Oct	Nov – Jan	Feb – April	May – July	Aug - Oct
Stage 1	Literature review and planning					
Stage 2		Launch and consultation				
Stage 3			Design of survey and website			
Stage 4				Actual survey to take place		
Stage 5					Data analysis and report writing	
Stage 6						Final report publication

We need your help

It is hoped that the survey will receive broad support and assistance from the yoga teacher associations and the yoga industry in general.

Please note that Yoga in Australia is not aligned with any yoga school or organisation and does not intend making political comment, but rather will report back to the industry the findings of the survey, the content of which will be decided in consultation with the yoga industry. The Yoga in Australia project is to be seen as an asset to the industry as a whole.

We invite expressions of interest from people wishing to:

- ▷ ***formally or informally support the project***
- ▷ ***help us make contact with yoga teachers and the industry in general***
- ▷ ***make suggestions for topics/questions to be canvassed by the survey***
- ▷ ***make suggestions for the methodology to be employed by the project***
- ▷ ***make any other comments to ensure the relevance of the project to the industry***

Please register your interest by joining in the discussion (via the website forums available from late August/early September) at www.yoginaustralia.com or by contacting us by telephone or email.

Contact details

Please contact the YTAA if you have any suggestions or questions at jackieb@yogateachers.asn.au.

If you do not have email access you can ring the YTAA on 0500 559 824.

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