Is getting your geriatric patients to participate in treatment sessions becoming a bit of a stretch? Do you feel like you are bending over backwards trying to come up with new programs for your geriatric patients? Yoga may be the solution to your problems since it has many physical and mental benefits for the geriatric population.

As your patients age, it is important to incorporate a variety of activities into their everyday routine to ensure overall health and fitness. Yoga is a great way to meet this recommendation because it provides a variety of benefits across many domains of physical fitness. Yoga is well-known for its intricate poses that promote flexibility and balance. These poses can be modified to the geriatric patients level of fitness and progress as the person improves. The poses often require single leg stance or positioning one’s center of mass outside of their base of support. Maintaining these poses for an extended amount of time works to challenge the patient’s vestibular system to improve the strength of stabilizing muscles. Gait improvements have also been seen in the geriatric population as a result of participating in a regular yoga program. Yoga helps to increase lower extremity strength, such as hip extension, which allows for longer stride length. Additionally, yoga works to target core muscles for better abdominal activation, decreasing anterior pelvic tilt during ambulation, static sitting, and standing. This can help to reduce low back pain, which is a common complaint in this population. A lesser-known benefit of yoga is that it helps to strengthen bones as well. This is a great benefit for geriatric patients who are at high risk of osteoporosis and fractures. The combination of improved balance, strength, and mobility helps to prevent falls in the aging adult. Falls are one of the leading causes of injury in the geriatric population and often result in further complications. By preventing falls, yoga helps to give geriatric patients the physical ability and confidence to continue to live an active lifestyle.

Geriatric patients with comorbidities are at increased risk for depression and other mental health related conditions. These conditions in the geriatric population can go undiagnosed by healthcare providers and be assumed to be a part of normal aging, even though it’s not. Since yoga is considered a mind-body physical activity, it can help to address some of these mental health factors that may be present in the geriatric population along with the physical benefits previously mentioned. For these patients meditation via yoga can help to improve perceived mental health along with reducing the overall risk of depression. This makes yoga a valuable form of treatment to be utilized in the geriatric population since it can help prevent and treat mental disease. Yoga can be a great adjunct to your geriatric patients’ plan of care, but before you commit to making your patients full-on Yogis, some factors need to be considered. Just like with other specialties of physical therapy, yoga may be best instructed by a physical therapist who has taken continuing education courses on it’s practice and execution in a clinical setting. Additionally, some patients may feel uncomfortable performing
certain positions and transitions because they are fearful of falling. Addressing these concerns with your patients beforehand and offering modifications and extra assistance can ensure their safety while maximizing the benefits of yoga. Yoga should not be used in place of activities like gait and task specific training, as it may not be as effective in improving mobility or upper extremity function, but it can be a great way to add variety and fun to your treatment sessions.

Overall, yoga can promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of geriatric patients in physical therapy. This helps to encourage the overall health promotion and safety of your geriatric patients. If yoga is implemented there are many different frequencies and durations that can be utilized. However, to maximize the effects of yoga, sessions should occur two times per week for at least 30-90 minutes at a moderate intensity. Although yoga can be perceived as a younger generation activity, don’t be afraid to include these techniques into your geriatric population's plan of care. Namaste.

References