

STEP – Stretching To EmPower

Why Yoga?

Yoga is appropriate for the target population, which consists of women of all ages living in Allegany County public housing complexes, from teens to 99-years young. According to a 2012 *Yoga Journal* report, **83 percent of U.S. yoga participants are women**. It is the rare activity that appeals to women across the lifespan and across socioeconomic groups, and one that is readily adaptable to all ages and experience levels.

STEP participants generally cannot take advantage of the benefits yoga offers, mainly due to a lack of resources. Residents of public housing, most of these women lack the disposable income to pay for yoga sessions at the local YMCA, nor in many cases do they have transportation to get there. STEP will be offered onsite at the housing complexes.

Trauma-Sensitive Yoga - Trauma-sensitive yoga, a psychosocial group intervention for adults affected by traumatic stress, is based on the central components of the hatha style of yoga, which focuses on integrating breathing and meditation with a set of physical postures and movements. In trauma-sensitive yoga, elements of traditional hatha yoga are modified to maximize tolerance, build trauma survivors' experiences of empowerment, and cultivate a more positive relationship to one's body.

Yoga builds both physical and mental, and in some cases, spiritual strength and resolve, all of which contribute significantly to the program goal of strengthening participants against the allure of opioids. *“The purpose of yoga is to create strength, awareness and harmony in both the mind and body,”* says Dr. Natalie Nevins of the American Osteopathic Association, a board-certified osteopathic family physician and Kundalini Yoga instructor. *“The relaxation techniques incorporated in yoga can lessen chronic pain, such as lower back pain, arthritis, headaches and carpal tunnel.”*

Chronic pain - Chronic pain is at the heart of much opioid misuse, as the inescapable torment of a herniated disc, old injury or other ailment drives people to seek relief through medication. According to the *National Pain Strategy* produced by NIH, chronic pain is more prevalent among Americans than cancer, diabetes and heart disease *combined*. In a 2016 white paper, The American Society of Addiction Medicine reported that **women are over-represented among the estimated 9-12 million Americans suffering from chronic or persistent pain** and more vulnerable to conditions that lead to opioid misuse and addiction: *“Women are more likely to have chronic pain, be prescribed prescription pain relievers, be given higher doses, and use them for longer time periods than men.”* Partly as a result of such factors, the report added, *“Women may become dependent on prescription pain relievers more quickly than men.”*

This makes a fertile field indeed for addiction, and an area ripe for the benefits of yoga. Dr. Nevins, the yoga advocate, noted that **physical benefits of yoga include increased flexibility, increased muscle strength and tone, improved respiration, energy and vitality, more balanced metabolism, weight reduction, cardio and circulatory health and protection from injury.** All of these benefits can come into play in helping to prevent the injury or physical condition that can lead to chronic pain in the first place, and opioid misuse subsequently.

Stress - Beyond physical benefits, yoga also confers a personal “centeredness” that can be just as important in deterring opioid misuse and resisting the slippery slope of addiction. As SAMHSA notes in *Prevention of Substance Abuse and Mental Illness*, a comprehensive approach to behavioral health includes prevention as part of the overall continuum of care, including the creation of environments that “support behavioral health and the ability of individuals to withstand challenges.”

Another word for the “challenges” of life that befall us all -- and land more heavily on low-income women who often serve as caregivers -- is stress, which can itself produce physical effects that contribute to the risk of opioid misuse. *“Stress can reveal itself in many ways, including back or neck pain, sleeping problems, headaches, drug abuse, and an inability to concentrate,”* Dr. Nevins notes. *“Yoga can be very effective in developing coping skills and reaching a more positive outlook on life.”*