

How Exercise May Reduce Your Pain

by Stacey Shannon

For IC patients, getting off of the couch can be difficult. Leaving the house may be impossible. Exercising seems a laughable idea during the worst of times. But, according to urologist Robert Evans at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center in North Carolina, exercising can really be just what the doctor ordered.

“We encourage everybody to every day or every other day do something to get that endorphin release and get a little pain relief,” he said, explaining that endorphins actually help alleviate pain.

However, Evans was also quick to point out that IC patients need to be careful when exercising to ensure they don't aggravate the bladder further. And patients have found that to be true. They must learn what their bladders can tolerate and what they can't. While each patient is different in many ways, some forms of exercise seem to fit across the board for ICers.

Research

Back in 2004, Evans encouraged Dr. William Karper, associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, to include IC patients in his research. Karper, who had been working with fibromyalgia patients on how exercise affected their pain, decided to include IC patients, though he had his doubts.

“I did not think it would work,” he said. *“I did not think it would help them that much. [Evans] strongly believed that these women needed an exercise program. It would also affect their self concept and how they felt about their*



ability to do things. That seemed to be the case.”

Karper's study was small and started with only six IC patients. Of those six patients, only two were able to complete the low impact exercise regime. What struck Karper most was that no negative effects were observed from the exercise. Instead, the women reported a lessening of some IC symptoms.

“I think the right kind of mild exercise for many people with IC could really be helpful in their activities of daily living,” Karper said. *“[IC patients] are just so miserable that they cannot imagine that a little bit of physical activity can help. The fact is that seems to be the opposite.”*

Evans concurred: *“If they can do enough, it will help with the pain. It just has to be done reasonably.”* For Karper's study, he had patients work

out for 35 to 40 minutes, three days a week for six months. Each session included walking, light upper body strength training with 3 to 4-pound dumbbells, range of motion exercises, balance exercises and core strengthening exercises.

“It's just a matter of going slow and not doing things that aggravate the condition,” Karper said. *“The whole idea is to improve quality of life.”*

Yoga

The first type of exercise that Evans recommended was yoga. He said many of his patients have had luck with yoga.

“We've had patients time after time come in and say this made a difference,” he said.

That makes sense to Leslie Howard, a yoga instructor in California who specializes in the pelvic floor. She works with many

students who have pelvic floor dysfunction, something that is also common to IC patients. Howard said thanks to desk jobs women are sitting more. The longer a person sits, the less fresh blood supply gets to the pelvis which can increase tension and pain.

“*Movement is crucial,*” she said, mentioning that she tells patients to divide up their day and make sure to sit, stand and perch throughout the day to work muscles and keep the blood flowing well throughout the body. “*Some movement is better than no movement.*”

Yoga exercises such as the downward dog pose and squatting are good for the pelvic region, according to Howard. Hip opening exercises are also beneficial.

“*I call the hip muscles friends and associates of the pelvic floor,*” she said.

Howard suggested that IC patients look for a restorative yoga class which includes more gentle exercises.

Dawn Mahowald, a certified yoga instructor and co-author of **Cystitis: A Time to Heal with Yoga and Accupressure, an Eight Week Exercise Program with Special Information on Interstitial Cystitis and Urethral Syndrome**, mentioned that patients might want to look for a smaller class rather than a larger one. In smaller classes, instructors are able to give students more individual attention and could help an ICer modify exercises to work well for her body.

“*I would highly recommend that people find someone who is a yoga therapist and not just a yoga teacher,*” Mahowald said, explaining that yoga therapists have more medical and/or physical therapy knowledge.

For patients who either can't afford a yoga class or don't have access to one, Mahowald said a number of other resources are available including books, DVDs, YouTube videos and more. She recommended IC patients start with looking at yoga for seniors or pregnant women, both of which utilize simple movements and should be the lowest impact of all yoga.

Mahowald also pointed out that

patients don't need to invest in lots of equipment. Beginning yoga students at home start with a blanket on carpet with a few sturdy toss pillows around to help prop them into position when needed.

Along with the physical benefits of stretching and toning muscles while also releases endorphins to help fight pain, yoga can provide a stress relief and pain distraction for patients.

“*When you are stretching, you concentrate on those parts of the body,*” Mahowald said. “*Your focus goes elsewhere. If you really can focus on something else for a few minutes, your perception of pain decreases a great deal.*”

She suggested that patients start slowly and work their way up. Mahowald said resting in between poses is a good idea as well, especially when starting out, to see how the body reacts to what it's doing.

Water exercise

Another low impact exercise that can work well for some patients is water sports. Evans said swimming or water aerobics have worked well for some of his patients, but they come with some caveats.

For ICers who have trouble with increased symptoms from chlorine, Evans recommended looking for a

salt pool or a pool that isn't treated with large amounts of chlorine. He also said patients should immediately change out of their wet bathing suits and shower right away, especially in a chlorinated pool.

Making sure the pool is extra warm as well is important for IC patients who generally have sensitivity to extreme temperatures.

Belly dance

Sometimes working out can come from more than just traditional exercises. Belly dance is a low-impact activity that works the body while still being gentle for the bladder.

Kathleen Hancock, a 36-year-old offer manager in Vancouver, British Columbia, was diagnosed with IC in 2004 after her symptoms started in 1999. Before her symptoms began, Hancock did lots of walking and kempo karate. After her bladder began acting up, she didn't have enough energy or was in too much pain to exercise. She tried belly dancing and was pleased with the results.

“*It is gentle on my body and is great exercise,*” Hancock said. “*[I] lost about 10 to 15 pounds with it. Belly dance is gentle yet invigorating. With belly dance, it doesn't seem like exercise and the music is soothing.*”



Liz Wray, owner and director of Ancient Arts American Belly Dance studio in Indiana, said belly dancing is a good all-over workout.

"You can work all different kinds of muscles in every different kind of move," she said. *"You can also get a good cardio workout at the same time."*

Belly dancing also helps build core muscles around the abdomen which can give dancers more strength and more flexibility.

"Belly dancing is usually good for everything," Wray said. *"It's low impact, and it's very adaptive."*

Wray said good belly dance instructors work with their students to adapt moves for their bodies. She tells her students that her body may be able to do things that theirs cannot, and that's OK.

"You know your body best," she said. *"If it hurts, stop doing it."*

Both Hancock and Wray pointed out that belly dancers come in all shapes, sizes and ages. Exposing the belly is fine but not a necessity.

"You don't have to be a size double zero," Hancock said. *"Most of the girls in my classes are size 14 plus."*

Just like with other exercises, belly dancing also offers mental benefits as well as physical. Wray said she sees many students whose self esteem blossom as they get into belly dancing. She loves to see that transformation in others, because she understands it firsthand.

"Belly dancing for me personally changed my life and my self-esteem issues," she said. *"I had really terrible self-esteem issues. I was suffering from depression at the time and couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without crying. Belly dancing helped me accept myself for who I was at this moment in time. It's very much about living in the moment. I'm going to be this person in this moment only once, and I'm going to love this person as I am."*

Hancock has a similar philosophy: *"My number one rule is to love my body, even when I hate it for being in pain all the time. And what gets me through my day, besides my wonderful husband, is laughter. If you can laugh at yourself doing some of these move, it will release good endorphins, and the pain may not seem as bad."*



Both Wray and Hancock suggested that beginners look for a belly dance class in their area. Wray said that asking for credentials and education is appropriate. For those who don't have a belly dance class available in their area or want to try at home first, numerous videos and DVDs can be found through YouTube and other sites. One of Wray's favorite DVD series is from Dolphina.

"I still use DVDs myself as a tool for my own practice," she said. *"So they're always good."*

Modified workouts

Having IC doesn't mean that patients can only do certain workouts. Many workout plans are able to be modified to work with a patient's body instead of against it. Vickie Bleile, a 54-year-old IC patient and wildlife artist in northern Idaho, has been working out to an exercise tape called "Power 90: Six-week body makeover" that she saw advertised on television for 11 years. She's just modified some of the program to work best for her.

"I know that some don't like following a recorded exercise program repeatedly day after day, but for me this seems

to work well," Bleile said. *"The program has two tapes – DVDs now. One [is] weight training and the other cardio, which one does on alternating days, six days a week."*

Her IC can get in the way of her workouts, though. Bleile said if she is flaring or on the verge of a flare then she doesn't exercise. She's learned through trial and error that doing so will just make her bladder feel worse and her flare last longer. She's also come up with ways to modify the exercise program to make it easier on her bladder.

"I skip the jumping jacks and any hopping type sessions," she said. *"I've replaced them with walking. Then I decided since I'm walking, I might as well turn it into a win/win situation, [so] I walk the dogs at our local animal shelter."*

Bleile also pays attention with the weight training portion of the workout to make sure that she's not contracting her abdominal muscles.

Certified personal trainer and exercise guide writer for About.com, Paige Waehner, said that exercise videos can certainly be a helpful tool. She said low impact ones are available, which is ideal for IC patients. Working the core muscles

of the abdomen and building their strength can also be helpful. For that Waehner recommends an exercise ball.

“You can do crunches on it or even sit on it while doing strength work to increase core work,” she said.

The final component to any fitness routine is staying motivated and committed to it, which can definitely be a struggle with or without IC.

While patients can certainly go to a gym to workout, Waehner also said that just a few items can get them started at home such as an exercise ball, resistance bands and dumbbells.

“You can get a great total body workout with those few tools,” she said, mentioning that a treadmill or elliptical trainer can also come in handy. *“It’s much easier to squeeze in a workout if you can hop on a machine at any time, but you don’t need expensive equipment to get a great workout.”*

Working with a personal trainer is a good idea for someone with IC to develop exercises they can easily do, but numerous resources are also available online.

Everyday activities

Having a routine workout or class is a great plan to stay in shape, but small changes in daily life can also have some impact. Bleile said along with her workouts, she also makes an effort to incorporate exercise into whatever she’s doing.

“I’ve always focused on the little things [like] choosing the furthest space in any parking lot [and] opting to take the stairs rather than an elevator,” she said. *“And my lifestyle is such that it includes plenty of outdoor pursuits which provide exercise: fishing, hiking, nature photography and hunting.”*

Fellow ICer, Diane Davis, has

found her own ways to exercise as well. Though the 45-year-old Indiana resident has had to give up some activities like bike rides, horse-back riding and running that aggravate her bladder, she’s found other ways to stay fit. She does regular workouts with an exercise ball and an Ab Lounge, but she also works out on the golf course.

“I play at least five times a week and maybe more depending on how I feel and the weather,” David said.

Staying motivated

The final component to any fitness routine is staying motivated and committed to it, which can definitely be a struggle with or without IC.

“When you’re thinking of working out and you’re just not feeling motivated, remember all the things you’ll get out of that workout,” Waehner said. *“You’ll burn calories, you’ll give yourself more energy for your day, you’ll get yourself one step closer to your goals and you’ll feel good about yourself. Sometimes getting started is the hardest*

part, so make it as easy as possible to get started with your workout.”

She also suggested working in a reward system if necessary if that helps such as a new book or a massage.

“Use anything just to get started and you’ll more than likely keep going,” she said.

Bleile and Davis have both found that to be the case. Bleile stays motivated by noting the improvement in her attitude that comes from exercising as well as the energy boost and stamina she has to keep up with her grandchildren.

“The noticeable rewards provide my motivation,” she said. *“That and fear of how my life and abilities might be lessened if I didn’t continue.”*

Davis feels much the same way. She said exercising helps keep her immune system stronger to fight off viruses. She reaps mental benefits as well.

“I feel so much better about me since I started working out,” Davis said.

Web Resources for Fitness

Sites to find video workouts:

<http://www.collagevideo.com> – A Web site with exercise videos for sale, including many that are low impact oriented (Waehner)

<http://www.goddesslife.com/dvd-intro-to-bellydance> – The introductory belly dance DVD that Wray recommends. (Wray)

Sites to find instructors:

<http://www.restorativeyogateachers.com> – A site that includes a searchable database to find restorative yoga teachers and classes throughout the United States. (Howard)

<http://bellydanceclasses.net> – A site where you can find belly dance instructors all over the world by location. (Wray)

<http://www.iayt.org> – This site includes a searchable database to find a yoga therapist or yoga instructor

More information on specific exercises:

http://exercise.about.com/od/abs/ss/abmoves1_3.htm – Abdominal strengthening exercise called “bird dog” (Waehner)

http://exercise.about.com/od/abs/ss/abmoves1_2.htm – Abdominal strengthening exercise called “seated rotations” (Waehner)

http://exercise.about.com/od/abs/ss/abmoves1_4.htm – Abdominal strengthening exercise called “modified bicycle” (Waehner)

<http://exercise.about.com/cs/exbeginners/a/exforbeginners.htm> – A resource for beginners in getting started with an exercise program (Waehner)

<http://exercise.about.com/c/ec/79.htm> – A six-week exercise program designed for beginners. The site requires you to put in a bit of personal information. (Waehner)

<http://exercise.about.com/cs/exbeginners/l/blbegstrength.htm> – An exercise plan to build total body strength for beginners. This includes some of the aforementioned abdominal strengthening exercises. (Waehner)

<http://shira.net/> – A site linked to various resources all about belly dancing. (Wray)