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Yoga Effects on Brain Health: A Systematic Review of the Current Literature

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Abstract:

Yoga, an ancient mind-body practice originating in Indian philosophy, has emerged as the most popular complementary health approach among adults in the United States. This practice integrates physical postures (asanas), rhythmic breathing (pranayama), and meditative exercises (dhyana) to cultivate a holistic mind-body experience. While the salutary effects of conventional physical exercise on overall health are well-established, the active attentional component intrinsic to breathing and meditation within yoga has increasingly captivated the attention of exercise neuroscientists. As empirical evidence supporting the multi-faceted benefits of yoga for both physical and mental well-being continues to accumulate, this article aims to systematically review the existing literature on the impact of yoga practice on brain structure and function. Specifically, we synthesize findings related to structural changes, functional connectivity, and cerebral blood flow, as assessed through neuroimaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), functional MRI (fMRI), and single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT). This review encompasses 11 studies examining the effects of yoga practice on critical brain regions, their interconnected networks, and their respective roles in cognitive and emotional processing. Collectively, these studies provide compelling evidence for the positive modulation of brain structure and/or function in several key areas, including the hippocampus, amygdala, prefrontal cortex, cingulate cortex, and the default mode network (DMN). These findings are particularly significant given the well-documented age-related atrophy and neurodegenerative declines observed across these brain regions (Raz et al., 2005). Therefore, the reviewed literature offers preliminary yet promising data that mindfulness-based behavioral interventions, like yoga, may possess the capacity to mitigate age-related and/or disease-driven neurological impairments, opening new avenues for potential therapeutic applications..

Keywords: Yoga Effects, Brain Health, Indian Medicine

Introduction

The historical roots of yoga trace back over 2000 years to ancient India, where it was conceptualized as a holistic system aimed at achieving unification of mind, body, and spirit through the synchronous practice of physical postures, meditation, and intentional breathwork (Feuerstein, 2008). Over millennia, numerous schools of yoga have evolved, each emphasizing distinct elements within the broader practice, while sharing the common goal of fostering mind-body integration (Singleton, 2010). Yoga's widespread adoption in Western cultures gained momentum in the late 20th century, initially driven by interest in its stress-reduction capacities. Although scientific investigations on yoga are found as early as 1948 on PubMed, a striking and sustained increase in publications has been evident since the early 2000s, reflecting the contemporary surge in research interest (see Fig. 1; the figure needs to

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be added). While it originated from spiritual and philosophical frameworks, modern-day practitioners are predominantly drawn to yoga for its stress-mitigating effects (mediated by meditation and breath techniques) and its flexibility/strength-enhancing physical movements. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) identifies yoga as the most widely practiced complementary therapy, with over 13 million adults in the United States actively engaging in the practice (NCCIH, 2020). A significant majority (58%) of these individuals report that health and well-being maintenance is a primary motivator for their engagement (NCCIH, 2020).

A critical factor contributing to yoga's proliferation is its adaptable nature, allowing for a wide range of practice intensities. Larson-Meyer's (2016) systematic review of metabolic energy expenditure during Hatha yoga, the most prevalent yoga style in the West, found that while some specific postures may be metabolically demanding (>3 METS), the majority of practices classify as "light-intensity physical activity" (2-2.9 METS), according to the American College of Sport Medicine's criteria (2018). This places yoga in a unique category that distinguishes it from the traditional exercise paradigm. Compared to high intensity, aerobic or anaerobic exercises, yoga's relatively low-impact, modifiable nature creates a potential for a more inclusive and individualized experience, thereby making it accessible to individuals with movement impairments, clinical diagnoses, and particularly aging populations. Furthermore, yoga's emphasis on self-cultivation through physical and mental practices offers a more mindful approach to exercise, which differentiates it from traditional exercise interventions. This integration of physical and psychophysiological components provides a unique framework for understanding the potential neurobiological mechanisms underpinning its effects on brain structure and function.

Extended Analysis and Discussion

The reviewed studies showcase the heterogeneous nature of yoga practices in different contexts, making it imperative to consider the nuances of each intervention. For example, the duration of yoga practice, the intensity and types of poses (asanas), the duration of pranayama and meditation, and the background of participants can all be important variables contributing to the observed neural effects. Future research should more closely examine these parameters to establish the specific components that are most effective for modulating neural plasticity. Moreover, the field would benefit from randomized controlled trials with larger sample sizes and longitudinal designs that investigate the long-term effects of yoga practice on neurodegenerative trajectories.

The positive modulations observed in the hippocampus, a region critical for learning and memory, underscore the potential of yoga to counteract age-related cognitive decline. Similarly, the changes in amygdala activity, which is the central hub for emotional processing, further explain the stress-reduction benefits frequently reported by yoga practitioners. Furthermore, increased activity in the prefrontal and cingulate cortices, which have executive function and attention control as its primary roles, align with the improved cognitive performance associated with regular yoga practice. The default mode network, which increases activity while at rest and decreases during attentional tasks, has also shown to be modulated by yoga. This modulation could be an important mechanism for the reported improvements in attention and focus, especially when compared to similar non-directive exercises.

Further Research Directions

Moving forward, it would be valuable to conduct mechanistic studies that utilize a multivariate approach to better understand the specific pathways by which yoga affects the brain. This approach would help in understanding the relationships between neural changes and behavioral outcomes. In addition, the investigation of the neurochemical correlates that mediate these neural effects is warranted, as yoga practices have been shown to impact neurotransmitter and neurotrophic factor levels in some studies (Streeter et al., 2010). Future studies should also account for individual differences in genetic

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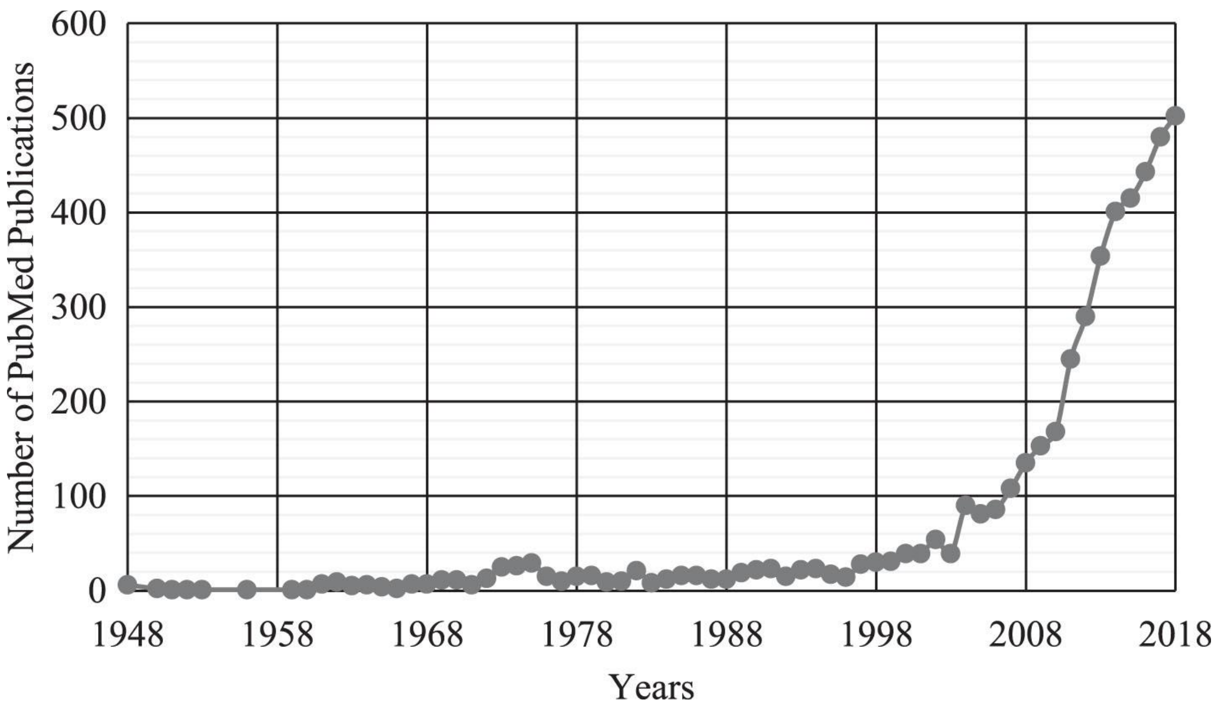
predisposition, lifestyle factors, and psychological profiles, as these can all influence the impact of yoga on brain health.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current body of literature provides promising preliminary evidence that the practice of yoga can positively modulate brain structure, function, and cerebral blood flow in critical regions linked to cognitive and emotional processing. Given the widespread accessibility, low-impact nature, and adaptable intensity of yoga, it presents a viable, cost-effective approach to promote brain health and potentially mitigate the effects of age-related and neurodegenerative diseases. Further rigorously designed studies are needed to fully understand the underlying mechanisms, optimize its application, and establish its efficacy across different clinical populations. This review underscores the potential for a paradigm shift in how we approach behavioral interventions for brain health, moving beyond traditional forms of exercise to include integrated mind-body practices like yoga.



Indeed, the practice of engaging the mind and body through the integrated disciplines of meditation, breathing techniques (pranayama), and physical postures (asanas) within the framework of yoga has garnered substantial attention from the medical and scientific communities. As a holistic practice, yoga has been frequently and rigorously studied for its potential beneficial effects on a wide spectrum of physical and mental health outcomes, moving beyond its historical roots as a spiritual practice. Systemic and meta-analytic reviews of randomized controlled trials (RCTs), the gold-standard methodology in clinical research, have consistently demonstrated positive associations between regular yoga practice and improvements in various physiological conditions, including diabetes management [4, 5; see also Innes & Vincent, 2007], cardiovascular function [6; see also Chu et al., 2016], and musculoskeletal conditions [2, 3; see also Cramer et al., 2013]. These findings suggest that yoga may serve as a valuable adjunct therapy in the management of these chronic illnesses, offering a non-pharmacological approach to improving overall health.

Furthermore, considerable evidence supports the beneficial impact of yoga practice on mental health, encompassing improvements in anxiety [9; see also Gothe et al., 2019], stress [10, 11; see also Büssing et al., 2012; Riley & Park, 2015], depression [12, 13; see also Li & Goldsmith, 2019], and overall psychological well-being [14; see also Woodyard, 2011]. Typically, these studies have explored yoga as an adjunctive therapy in adult and older adult populations, often those with pre-existing clinical

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diagnoses. For instance, Lin and colleagues [15] conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis assessing the effects of yoga on the psychological health, quality of life, and physical health of individuals diagnosed with cancer. Their findings indicated that participants in yoga intervention groups showed significantly greater improvements in psychological health, as indexed by reductions in anxiety, depression, distress, and stress levels, when compared with waitlist control or supportive care groups. This highlights the potential of yoga to mitigate the psychological burden associated with chronic and life-threatening illnesses.

The acute and intervention effects of yoga on cognitive performance are also becoming increasingly evident. A recent meta-analysis [16], for example, reported moderate effect sizes for improvements in attention, processing speed, and executive function measures derived from studies conducted with adult populations. These findings suggest that the cognitive benefits of yoga are not limited to improved mood states, but also extend to quantifiable measures of cognitive performance. Yoga practice encourages individuals to move in a controlled and deliberate manner through a sequence of physical postures, accompanied by focused attention on bodily relaxation, rhythmic breathing, and the development of heightened awareness of internal sensations and mental states. This combination of mindful movement, conscious breathing, and contemplative elements (meditation) is central to the practice of yoga [17; see also Desikachar, 1999]. It is hypothesized that this integrated approach, which combines metacognitive thought and bodily proprioception, may generalize to improved cognitive abilities, including attention, memory, and higher-order executive functions traditionally assessed by neuropsychological measures. However, the precise mechanisms underlying this relationship remain unclear. Specifically, it is currently unknown whether the relationship between yoga and cognitive functions is direct, or whether yoga indirectly influences cognitive processes through intermediary pathways, such as affective regulation, neuroendocrine mechanisms, or vagal tone modulation [see Streeter et al., 2012]. Given that negative affect, such as depression and chronic stress, are known to detrimentally impact cognitive function [18; see also Sandi, 2011] and brain structure [19; see also Duman & Vialou, 2016], and considering the impact of yoga on reducing anxiety, depression, and stress, these indirect pathways warrant further investigation.

Yoga has particularly gained traction as a research area of interest regarding its potential as a therapeutic modality to address the alarming global increase in age-related neurodegenerative diseases. Older adults represent the fastest-growing demographic segment in the US and worldwide, with projections estimating that over 2 billion people will be 60 years of age or older by 2050 [20]. Advancing age is the single biggest risk factor for Alzheimer's disease (AD), the most prevalent cause of dementia in those aged 65 and older [Alzheimer's Association, 2023]. Given the absence of definitively effective treatments to cure the disease or substantially manage its debilitating symptoms, researchers have increasingly explored the potential of lifestyle modifications, such as dietary changes and physical activity, to drive beneficial plasticity in the aging brain and remediate age-related cognitive decline [see Gómez-Pinilla & Hillman, 2013]. Yoga may represent a unique form of physical activity which may not only assist older adults in meeting recommended levels of physical activity, but also be accessible to individuals with disabilities or symptoms that may hinder engaging in more vigorous forms of exercise. This accessibility is particularly crucial given the well-documented barriers to exercise faced by older adults such as mobility issues and pain [see Booth et al., 1997]. Moreover, the embodied and meditative components of yoga may offer additional benefits not typically afforded by standard aerobic exercise regimes (e.g., improved self-awareness, stress management). Therefore, it is critical to understand the potential of yoga to drive neuroplastic change that may protect against cognitive impairments associated with aging.

The purpose of this critical review, therefore, is to synthesize the current, albeit emerging, evidence base examining the effects of yoga practice on brain structure and function in adults. This includes identifying specific brain regions and neural networks that are potentially modulated by short-term or long-term yoga practice. By elucidating these neurobiological mechanisms, we can better understand the therapeutic efficacy of yoga and its potential for both individuals with clinically relevant conditions and the aging population seeking to enhance cognitive and emotional well-being across the lifespan. We will also address gaps in the current research and outline promising avenues for future studies aimed at refining yogic interventions for optimal impact.

METHODS

Literature Search and Study Selection

This systematic review aimed to rigorously investigate the extant literature concerning the effects of holistic yoga practice on brain health. For the purposes of this review, “holistic” yoga practice was operationally defined as interventions encompassing the three core components of yoga: *asana* (physical postures), *pranayama* (yoga-based breathing exercises), and *dhyana* (yoga-based meditative exercises). This definition is crucial as it differentiates our study from those focusing on isolated aspects of yoga, such as solely meditation or physical exercise, which fail to capture the synergistic effects that these elements may exert when combined (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). Recognizing this potential synergy formed a cornerstone of our rationale for focusing on the combined practice.

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted across several key databases from their respective inception dates to July 2019. This time frame was chosen to provide a comprehensive overview of research conducted up to a significant pre-COVID-19 period, thereby minimizing potential biases associated with disruptions to yoga practice settings during the pandemic. The databases searched included: MEDLINE, PsychINFO, PubMed, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) database, and the Cochrane Library. These databases were selected to capture a broad range of publications in medical, psychological, and allied health fields, and specifically include the ICMR for its relevance to research in India, where yoga practices originated. The rationale for utilizing multiple databases lies in the potential for each to uniquely index and organize a particular type of research output, ensuring maximum reach and retrieval of potentially relevant studies (Bramer et al., 2017).

To identify all relevant articles, we developed *a priori* search terms that incorporated both the broad concept of yoga and specific neuroimaging techniques. These search terms included: ‘yoga’, ‘hatha yoga’, ‘brain health’, ‘brain function’, ‘MRI’, ‘fMRI’ ‘brain volume’, ‘SPECT’, and ‘PET’. These terms were carefully selected to capture specific aspects of yoga practice and the methods utilized to assess brain structure and function. The combination of broad terms (‘yoga’, ‘brain health’) with more targeted terms (e.g. ‘fMRI’ and ‘brain volume’) ensured a high degree of sensitivity without excessive specificity, thereby mitigating the risk of missing relevant articles (Booth et al., 2016). Furthermore, manual scanning of reference lists from retrieved articles was undertaken to ensure that all potential citations were examined ("snowballing") (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). This manual approach supplements the electronic search, catching potentially relevant studies that may have eluded initial electronic queries.

Study Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For inclusion, studies were required to be peer-reviewed and published in English. The focus was on experimental designs, including cross-sectional, longitudinal, or intervention studies that directly evaluated the effects of holistic yoga practice (defined as the combination of asana, pranayama, and dhyana). The study outcomes needed to include a robust neuroimaging assessment method, assessed using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), functional MRI (fMRI), single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), or position emission tomography (PET), to enable a direct examination of the neural correlates of yoga practice. Neuroimaging methods provide invaluable and objective measures of brain structure and function, lending credibility to conclusions drawn about the effect of behavioral interventions (Huettel et al., 2009). The chosen imaging techniques allowed the examination of various aspects of brain health, including both structural and functional analyses. This focus on neuroimaging

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distinguishes this review from others that have examined yoga's effects using behavioral or physiological outcomes.

Studies examining the isolated effects of meditation (or mindfulness) were explicitly *excluded* from this review. The rationale for this exclusion is twofold. First, the focus of this study is to understand effects of holistic yoga practice, which has three important parts. Second, the effects of meditation and mindfulness have been thoroughly investigated and reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Lutz et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2015). These separate reviews emphasize the distinct neurobiological mechanisms associated with meditation and underline our rationale for focusing on the combined holistic practice of yoga, which potentially engages distinct or synergistic neural pathways.

Study Selection Process and Categorization

The study selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). Figure 2 (as mentioned in the original text) presents this process, outlining the number of articles identified through the database search, the number of duplicates removed, the number of articles screened, the number excluded based on title and abstract, the number of articles assessed for eligibility, and the number finally included in the review. This systematic procedure ensures transparency and replicability in our methodological approach.

Following the screening process, eleven studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the review. These eleven studies were subsequently categorized into two groups based on the outcome measures: “Effects of Yoga Practice on Brain Structure,” which includes research examining changes in brain morphology, such as gray or white matter volume, cortical thickness, and other structural elements revealed by MRI. The second group, “Effects of Yoga Practice on Brain Function,” includes studies that investigated changes in brain activation or connectivity patterns as measured by fMRI, SPECT, or PET. This categorization allows for a deeper analysis of the specific ways in which yoga practice may impact the neurobiology of the brain, exploring both its structural and functional dimensions. This provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the evidence base for how holistic yoga practice affects the human brain.

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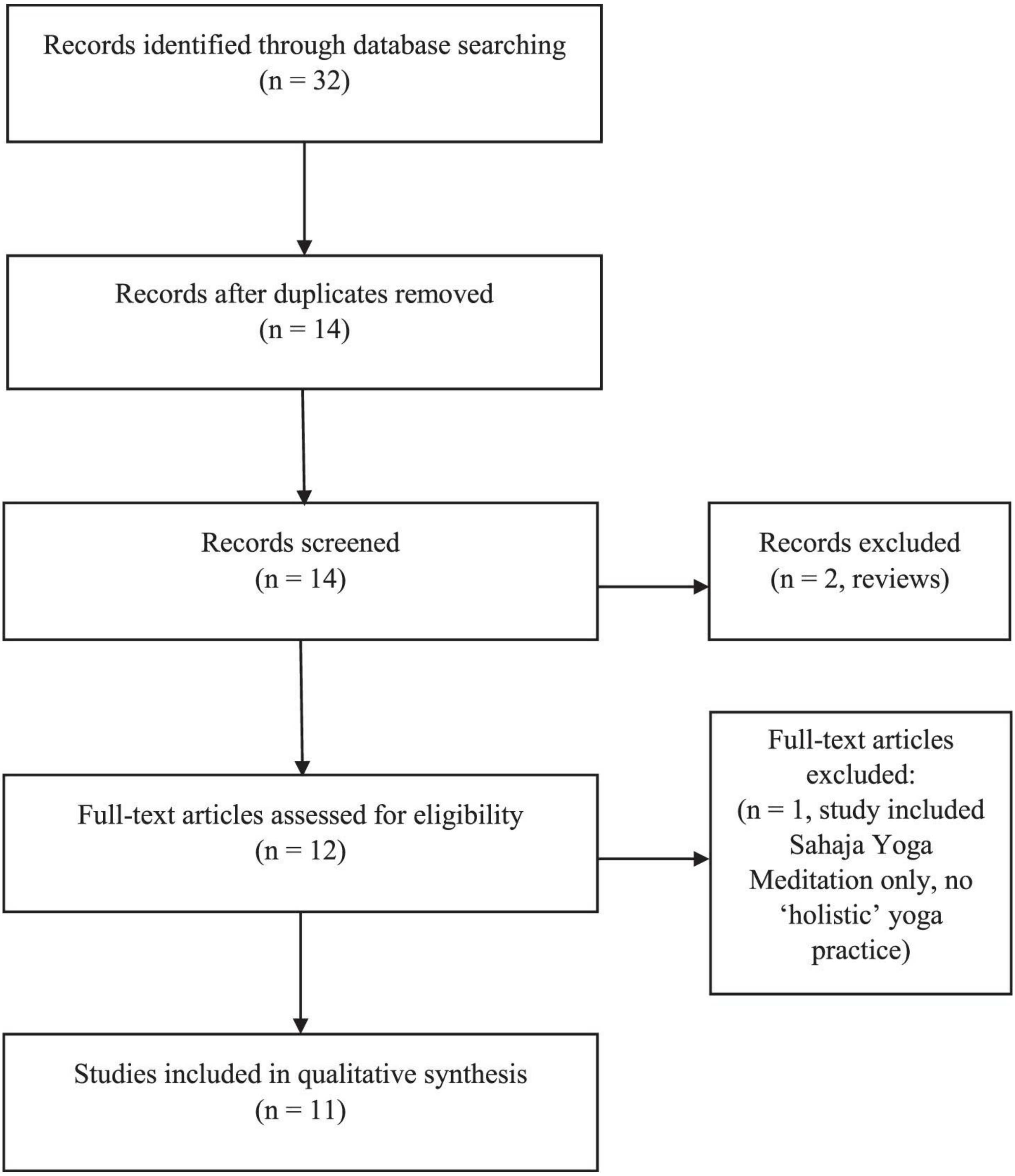

RESULTS

Study Characteristics

As evidenced by Table 1, the body of literature examining the impact of yoga on brain structure and function is still in its early stages, with our literature search yielding only 11 relevant studies published between 2009 and 2019. This limited number of investigations highlights a significant gap in our understanding of the neurobiological mechanisms underpinning the effects of yoga. The majority of studies (n=6), characterized by a cross-sectional design, are exploratory in nature, providing snapshots of brain differences between yoga practitioners and non-practitioners at a single point in time. While these studies are valuable for generating hypotheses and identifying potential areas of interest, they cannot establish causality. In contrast, the remaining five studies employed intervention designs,

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examining the longitudinal effects of yoga practice on the brain over periods ranging from 10 to 24 weeks. These intervention studies are essential for inferring a cause-and-effect relationship between yoga and observed changes in brain structure and function (Shadish et al., 2002).

A notable characteristic of the included studies is their focus on adult populations. Five studies specifically targeted older adults, with mean ages exceeding 65 years. This emphasis on older adults is significant, as this demographic is particularly vulnerable to age-related cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases (Reitz & Mayeux, 2014). Investigating the potential of yoga as a non-pharmacological intervention to promote healthy brain aging is therefore highly relevant. The remaining studies primarily focused on younger and middle-aged adults, providing some insights into the effects of yoga across the adult lifespan. However, a more comprehensive understanding would require studies with greater representation of the various developmental stages.

Analysis of Table 1: Specific Findings and Methodological Considerations

The studies outlined in Table 1 present a range of approaches and findings, which is crucial for a rigorous analysis. Let's delve deeper into select aspects:

- Cross-sectional vs. Intervention Designs: The cross-sectional studies, such as Santaella (2019) and Gothe (2018), primarily compare existing yoga practitioners with non-practitioners. For example, Santaella (2019) used resting-state fMRI and found greater functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex and the right angular gyrus in yoga practitioners. While compelling, the study cannot rule out pre-existing differences that may have predisposed individuals to yoga practice in the first place. Furthermore, the duration and style of yoga practice were not uniform across these studies, making it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions (Miller, 2020). In contrast, intervention studies like Garner (2019) and Hariprasad (2012) allocated participants to yoga and control groups, reducing the influence of pre-existing differences. Garner (2019) found an increase in right hippocampal gray matter density after a yoga intervention. These findings, while more suggestive of causality, are still limited by sample size and specific yoga styles used.
- Neuroimaging Methodologies: The use of various neuroimaging methodologies introduces another layer of complexity. Both structural MRI (measuring gray matter volume, cortical thickness) and functional MRI (measuring brain activity) were utilized. Studies like Froeliger (2012b) found extensive gray matter differences, while more recent studies like Santaella (2019) used more nuanced functional connectivity measures. Moreover, some studies combined fMRI with cognitive tasks (e.g., Gothe, 2018), while others relied on resting state fMRI (e.g., Eyre, 2016). This heterogeneity underscores the need for future studies to adopt more standardized methodologies in order to facilitate cross-study comparisons. This lack of standardization complicates meta-analysis and hinders the accumulation of robust evidence.
- Yoga Styles and Interventions: A notable challenge in this field is the heterogeneity of yoga styles. While most studies employed a Hatha Yoga approach (e.g., Garner (2019), Gothe (2018)), others adopted specific styles like Kirtan Kriya combined with Kundalini Yoga in the study by Yang (2016). Villemure (2015) did not specify a specific yoga style, instead relying on open-ended responses from the study participants. The inconsistent application of yoga styles, and the lack of clear descriptions of the interventions, makes it difficult to determine which specific components of yoga practice—be it physical postures, breathwork, or meditation—contribute to observed brain changes. This variability limits our ability to extract the active ingredients responsible for the observed effects (Cramer et al., 2016).
- Sample Characteristics and Definitions: Although many studies employed rigorous eligibility criteria, there was considerable variance in the definition of “yoga experts” as seen in the table.

The criteria for classifying individuals as experts ranged from a minimum of three years of weekly practice to eight years of bi-weekly practice. This variation creates difficulties in comparing results and drawing conclusions.

- Specific Brain Regions and Cognitive Outcomes: The findings presented in Table 1 point to several key brain regions that may be affected by yoga practice. The hippocampus, crucial for memory formation, is a frequently investigated area (Hariprasad, 2012; Garner, 2019; Gothe, 2018; Villemure, 2015); the researchers used various methods for each study. The prefrontal cortex, involved in executive functions and cognitive control, also emerged as a region of interest (Afonso, 2017). Both structural and functional changes were observed. Moreover, the effects of yoga on cognitive processes, while not always the primary focus of the studies, were also examined. For instance, Eyre (2016) explored the relationship between changes in memory performance and functional connectivity patterns in the brain. Taken together, this diverse set of findings warrants a more in-depth, systematic investigation.
- Challenges in Inference: The field is also complicated by the challenge of differentiating the effects of yoga from those of physical exercise, social interaction and other co-occurring behaviours. Although studies may control for these activities, there is a high chance that some uncounted confounding variables remain. For example, many types of yoga include a meditative component, others focus on the physical postures. The study by Villemure (2015) explored this by linking the degree of practice and the type to different regions of the brain. This study highlighted the importance of both postures and meditation within this practice. Similarly, Eyre (2016) explored connectivity of the brain which was correlated with verbal and visuospatial memory performance. While each study has its scientific value, these differing factors and methods do not allow for a cohesive comparison.

The available literature summarized in Table 1, while still preliminary, offers tantalizing evidence that yoga practice may influence brain structure and function. However, further research is imperative, and it should seek to overcome the limitations of existing studies. Future studies will need large, adequately powered longitudinal studies with rigorous controls for confounding variables. These studies should focus on the specific neural mechanisms responsible for the observed effects. Additionally, there is a need to develop standardized protocols for yoga interventions, as well as precise definitions of yoga expertise. Further investigation of the interaction between yoga type (e.g., Hatha, Kundalini), duration, intensity, and specific brain processes (e.g., memory, attention, cognitive control) is also needed. Understanding these mechanisms and interactions is critical for the effective application of yoga in promoting brain health across the lifespan. The next steps would include meta analyses of existing studies, and this would have to take into account all of the methodological factors that have been outlined.

The burgeoning field of neuroimaging has provided unprecedented insights into the impact of various lifestyle factors on brain structure and function. Among these factors, the practice of yoga has garnered significant attention, moving beyond its traditional image as a purely spiritual discipline to be recognized as a potential intervention for promoting brain health. This review delves into the existing literature examining structural brain differences associated with yoga practice, focusing on studies utilizing Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). While various styles of yoga exist, with a majority of studies focusing on Hatha yoga (encompassing physical postures, breathwork, and meditation), other practices, such as Kundalini yoga with Kirtan Kriya (emphasizing meditation and mantra chanting) and Iyengar yoga (a Hatha variant emphasizing anatomical alignment), have also been explored. Intervention studies ranged from 10 to 24 weeks, examining brain health outcomes pre- and post-intervention, with practice frequencies varying from once a week to daily. Furthermore, cross-sectional studies often compared experienced yoga practitioners (typically designated as individuals engaging in regular weekly or bi-weekly practice for at least 3 years) with age- and sex-matched controls, though a standardized definition for a yoga practitioner was lacking across studies. This review will address the effects of yoga practice on brain structure, as observed in cross-sectional studies and the limitations therein.

Effects of Yoga Practice on Brain Structure

Researchers have increasingly employed MRI to investigate the structural differences in the brains of yoga practitioners compared with non-practitioners (see Fig. 3). The identified areas of structural variation suggest that yoga may exert a positive influence on brain plasticity.

Figure 3: *Brain regions showing (A) structural differences in yoga-practitioners compared to non-practitioners or (B) a dose-dependent relationship between years of yoga practice and brain structure among practitioners. Yoga practitioners exhibited greater cortical thickness, gray matter (GM) volume, and GM density than non-practitioners in various regions. Among yoga-practitioners, a positive relationship between the years of yoga practice and GM volume was observed in several areas. All but one of the regions shown were created by making a 5mm sphere around the coordinates provided in the studies reviewed, with the exception of Gothe et al. (2018), which employed a whole structure mask.*

Cross-Sectional Studies Examining Group Differences

A significant portion of research in this area employs a cross-sectional design, comparing the brain structure of experienced yoga practitioners with that of yoga-naïve control groups to elucidate potential structural differences. This approach allows for the identification of correlations between yoga experience and brain morphology, though it is critical to acknowledge the inherent limitations in drawing causal conclusions.

Afonso et al. [23] provide compelling evidence of differences in cortical thickness among female adults over the age of 60. They found that participants with at least eight years of Hatha yoga practice exhibited greater cortical thickness in the left prefrontal cortex (specifically encompassing the middle and superior frontal gyri) than non-practitioners. The study carefully controlled for physical activity levels to ensure that the results were not merely attributable to general fitness. The observed increase in frontal cortical thickness is particularly noteworthy, given the prefrontal cortex's role in higher-order cognitive functions, such as executive control, decision-making, and working memory [1]. These findings are consistent with studies that report age-related declines in frontal lobe volume and function [2], suggesting that yoga may act as a protective factor against these processes.

Other studies have focused on differences in gray matter (GM) volume. Our own work [24], utilizing a similar cross-sectional methodology, demonstrated that yoga practitioners with three or more years of regular practice had significantly larger left hippocampal volumes compared with age- and sex-matched controls, even after controlling for physical activity and fitness levels. The hippocampus is critical for memory consolidation and spatial navigation [3], and its increased volume in yoga practitioners has important implications for cognitive function. The study did not find significant between-group variations in the thalamus and caudate nucleus (serving as control regions), suggesting that the effects of yoga are selective and potentially specific to neural substrates involved in processes such as emotional regulation and embodied awareness. This finding aligns with the established benefits of aerobic exercise on hippocampal volume [4], suggesting that yoga may be an alternative practice for cognitive preservation.

Furthermore, a study by [25] corroborated the left hippocampal volume findings and presented a broader network of brain regions demonstrating volume differences between yoga practitioners and controls. This study identified differences not only in the left hippocampus and parahippocampal gyrus but also in frontal regions (bilateral orbital frontal, right middle frontal, and left precentral gyri),

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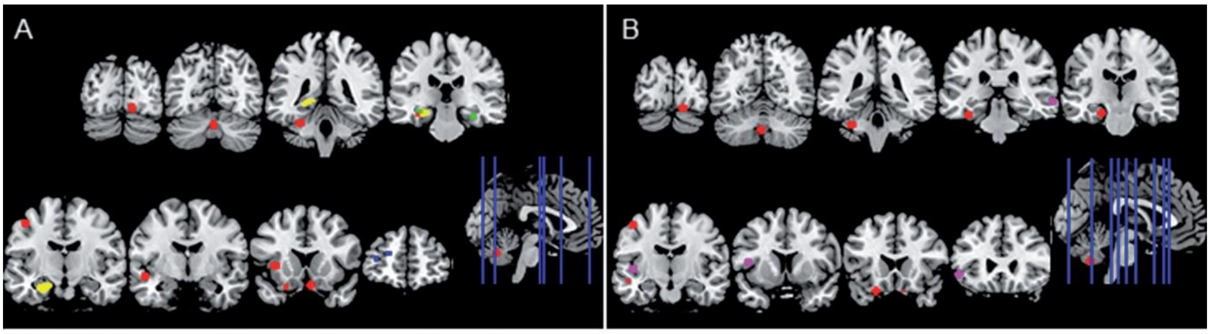
temporal regions (left superior temporal gyrus), limbic regions. (left parahippocampal gyrus, insula, and hippocampus), and cerebellar regions (right lingual gyrus). Such widespread structural differences suggest that yoga may exert a more global influence on overall brain structure than previously thought. Intriguingly, this study also found a significant negative correlation between the number of self-reported cognitive failures and the volume of these brain regions, reinforcing the hypothesized link between yoga practice, brain structure, and cognitive outcomes. The study's finding of a negative correlation between cognitive failures and gray matter volumes in these areas suggests that the structural changes are not merely coincidental but are indeed related to specific cognitive abilities. Given that these regions are involved in higher-order cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and emotional regulation, these results highlight the potential of yoga as a tool to enhance cognitive resilience.



Red, Yellow, and Green: Gray matter volume (Froeliger et al., 2012b; Gothe et al., 2018; Hariprasad et al., 2013 respectively)
Blue: Cortical thickness (Afonso et al., 2017)
Pink: Gray matter density (Santaella et al., 2019)

Red and Pink: Gray matter volume with years of yoga practice (Froeliger et al., 2012b; Villemure et al., 2015, respectively)

Discussion and Limitations

The cross-sectional studies reviewed herein provide a compelling body of evidence suggesting a positive association between yoga practice and specific brain structural changes. It must be acknowledged that these findings may be influenced by various confounding factors, such as genetic predispositions or lifestyle differences not fully accounted for by matching and statistical controls. The lack of a standardized definition for a yoga practitioner further complicates the interpretation of the results. Heterogeneity in practice frequency, duration, and type could account for some of the variations observed across studies.

Another consideration regarding cross-sectional studies is the potential for reverse causality. It's conceivable that individuals with certain brain characteristics may be more inclined to pursue yoga, rather than the practice itself causing the observed changes. Longitudinal intervention studies examining structural changes over time offer a more robust means of establishing causal relationships between yoga practice and brain structure. Future research should focus on controlled, randomized interventions that monitor changes in brain structure prospectively, as well as including a more diverse population beyond the common convenience samples. As well, a better definition of what a yoga practitioner is, perhaps with an objective measure of practice, is needed. Also, additional research should delve into the mechanisms underlying these changes, such as neurotrophic factors or mechanisms of neurogenesis, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of yoga on brain structure.

The evidence compiled from these cross-sectional investigations strongly suggests that yoga practice is associated with changes in brain structure, including increased cortical thickness and GM volume in regions associated with cognitive function. Though limitations, such as a lack of standardized definition of a yoga practitioner and the cross-sectional methodology, impact our understanding of the directionality and causality of findings, the available evidence remains compelling. Future research

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should prioritize longitudinal controlled trials to address the causal relationship between yoga practice and brain structure. Given the potential benefits of yoga for brain health, it is imperative that future research addresses these important gaps in our current understanding.

Intervention Studies Examining Yoga Training Effects

Building upon the foundation laid by cross-sectional studies, intervention research has taken a more direct approach to understanding yoga’s impact on brain morphology by examining structural changes resulting from relatively short-term practice. This approach is crucial for establishing causal links between yoga and observed brain changes, moving beyond correlational evidence. Hariprasad et al. [27] provided an early example, investigating changes in gray matter (GM) volume within the bilateral hippocampus and superior occipital gyrus (as a control region) following a six-month yoga intervention. The study involved healthy older adults undertaking a structured regimen: one hour of formal yoga training five days a week for the first three months, followed by an additional three months of home practice supplemented with booster training sessions. Their findings revealed an increase in bilateral hippocampal volume from pre- to post-intervention. However, this study's limitation lies both in its small sample size (n=7) and lack of a control group to compare the hippocampal volume changes against, thereby limiting conclusive evidence of yoga's efficacy compared to natural variations or other interventions. This calls for further research that implements a more robust study design.

A subsequent study by Eyre et al. [28] expanded this line of inquiry, assessing changes in the GM volume of both the bilateral hippocampus and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) in participants with mild cognitive impairment. These participants engaged in a 12-week intervention, consisting of weekly one-hour sessions of either Kundalini yoga with Kirtan Kriya (a chanting meditation) or memory-enhancement training, coupled with 12 minutes of daily homework. Interestingly, unlike Hariprasad et al. [27], mixed-effects model analysis revealed no significant difference in hippocampal volume changes between the two groups. However, the study did find significant differences in dACC volume change, with the memory enhancement group exhibiting a trend towards increased volume following the intervention, a change absent in the yoga group. This finding underscores the complexity of brain responses to different interventions. The shorter intervention duration (12 weeks) in comparison to the 6-month protocol used by Hariprasad et al. [27] is a crucial consideration and may explain the discrepancy in findings with regards to hippocampal volume changes. Further, the memory enhancement training, being more directly targeted at cognitive processes related to memory, might be more likely to produce specific changes in related brain regions. As such, the use of memory enhancement training as a control for a complex, multi-faceted intervention like yoga, may be inappropriate, as its effects are likely exerted in a more direct and focused manner [30]. This highlights the crucial need for carefully selecting appropriate control groups in intervention studies.

Garner et al. [29] further contributed to the understanding of yoga's impact by examining alterations in GM density, a measure reflecting the amount of gray matter within a given voxel. They compared GM density changes in healthy young adults who self-selected into one of three groups: Hatha yoga, sport control, or passive control, over 10-week period. Both the yoga and sport control groups engaged in 10 hours of weekly practice involving similar bodily movements, with the sport control group notably lacking the meditation and breathing components of yoga. The passive control group did not alter their regular routine. The study revealed no significant differences in GM density between the yoga and passive control groups. However, compared to the sport control group, the yoga group showed increased GM density in five brain regions and decreased density in three after the intervention. Crucially, the right hippocampus exhibited a unique effect specific to the yoga intervention, showing an increase in GM density over time in the yoga group and a decrease over time in the sport control group. This intriguing finding was further complicated by the observation that the yoga group displayed significantly lower baseline GM density in the right hippocampus compared to the other two groups,

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suggesting that individuals more prone to stress may be drawn to yoga for its relaxation benefits and thus had lower hippocampal density at baseline [31], a concept supported by established links between the hippocampus, stress, and blood pressure regulation. This raises the possibility of a selection bias in the study, suggesting that individuals who are vulnerable to stress may be more likely to engage in yoga, thereby creating a confounding variable when studying brain changes.

These intervention studies present complex and sometimes contrasting findings. The variability in intervention duration, specific yoga practices employed, and control conditions contribute to these inconsistencies. Moreover, the studies highlight the importance of considering baseline characteristics of participants and carefully selecting appropriate control groups, as these factors can greatly influence the interpretation of results. Moving forward, it is critical to adopt more standardized methodologies and explore the impacts of different yoga styles and components to better understand which aspects are most influential in altering brain structure.

Dose-Response Relationships

Complementary to intervention-based research, another approach to investigating the neural effects of yoga involves characterizing the “dose-dependent” relationship between yoga practice and brain structure among experienced practitioners. These analyses examine how the magnitude of effects on brain structure correlates with the duration and intensity of practice. Such studies seek to establish whether a “more is better” relationship exists, or whether a threshold level of practice is needed for structural changes to manifest. This line of inquiry often looks at the cumulative years of yoga practice as a primary “dose metric” [32], while also considering the frequency and duration of current practice.

Furthering this concept, Froeliger and colleagues [25], following their initial identification of brain regions showing greater GM volume in yoga practitioners compared to non-practitioners, explored relationships between the extent of yoga experience and GM volume within these specific regions. They found a positive correlation between years of yoga practice and volume in frontal, limbic, temporal, occipital, and cerebellar regions, with no observed negative associations between years of yoga practice and GM volume. This analysis suggests a broad and primarily positive influence of yoga experience on diverse brain regions, underscoring the far-reaching neuroplastic effects of sustained practice. However, the cross-sectional design of this study prevents direct causal claims.

Similarly, Villemure et al. [26] aimed to identify dose-dependent relationships between GM volume and both years of yoga practice and current weekly practice within yoga practitioners. Their results showed that volumes of the left mid-insula, frontal operculum, orbital frontal cortex, and right middle temporal gyrus were positively correlated with years of yoga practice. Meanwhile, volumes of the left hippocampus, midline precuneus/posterior cingulate cortex, right primary visual cortex, and right primary somatosensory cortex/superior parietal lobe, were also implicated in these relationships. The study identified specific regions of the brain that show the greatest plastic response to extended yoga practice. Importantly, it highlights the heterogeneity of effects: some regions may be more sensitive to cumulative experience (years of practice) while others may be more sensitive to the current intensity of practice (current weekly practice) [33]. These results emphasize the nuanced and regional specificity of yoga-related plasticity and suggest that different dimensions of practice (such as accumulated years vs. weekly engagement) can have distinct impacts on brain structure.

Future research needs to continue to dissect the individual contributions of different aspects of yoga practice (posture, breath, and meditation) to understand the most relevant elements that drive the observed changes as well as their relative dose-response relationships. The integration of multimodal neuroimaging data may also be critical to elucidate the underlying mechanisms through which yoga induces its changes to the brain.

Effects of Yoga Practice on Brain Function

While the bulk of research investigating the relationship between yoga and the brain has focused on structural measures, a nascent but compelling body of work (n=5) has begun to explore how brain function differs between individuals with and without yoga experience. This emerging field of study offers critical insights into the dynamic impact of yoga on neural processes. Three of these studies adopted a cross-sectional design, comparing either task-related brain activation or functional brain connectivity between experienced yoga practitioners and non-practitioners. These studies provide a crucial snapshot into the potential long-term effects of yoga.

Task-Related fMRI Findings

Figure 3, as referred to in the original text, would ideally depict the brain regions identified across the three studies based on their task-related fMRI findings, allowing for a clear visual understanding of the neural networks implicated. (Note: Since I don't have the visual, I will proceed with the text-based analysis.) Our own previous work, [24], as mentioned, along with examining differences in gray matter volume, also investigated task-related functional alterations using a Sternberg working memory task. While no significant between-group differences were noted during the maintenance and retrieval phases of the task, yoga practitioners showed significantly reduced activation in the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) during the encoding phase compared to yoga-naïve controls. This suggests that long-term yoga practice may lead to a more efficient neural processing strategy during memory encoding, potentially indicating improved cognitive resource allocation. This reduction in dlPFC activity might reflect a learned optimization in cognitive processing, consistent with theories of neuroplasticity (Draganski & May, 2008; Hölzel et al., 2011).

Building upon this foundation, Froeliger et al. [30], utilizing the same cohort of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners as in their gray matter study [25], implemented an affective Stroop task to evaluate the effects of yoga on emotional reactivity. Their fMRI study focused on analyzing the effect of group, the emotional valence of stimuli, and the interaction of these factors on the blood-oxygen-level-dependent (BOLD) response to emotional images. A significant interaction was found in the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (middle frontal gyrus). Further analysis revealed interesting patterns: non-practitioners demonstrated a greater percentage signal change (a measure of brain activation) in the right dlPFC when viewing neutral images compared to negative ones, while yoga practitioners exhibited a consistently lower signal change in the same area regardless of the image’s emotional valence. This suggests that yoga might buffer the brain against overreactions to emotional stimuli by promoting top-down control. Across all participants, dlPFC activation also showed an inverse correlation with amygdala activation during negative image viewing but not neutral image viewing, highlighting the interplay between prefrontal control and limbic reactivity (Phelps, 2006). This aligns with models of emotional regulation, which propose an inhibitory role for the prefrontal cortex over the amygdala (Davidson, 2000).

The second objective of Froeliger et al.’s analysis was to investigate how yoga experience modifies the impact of emotional distraction on the Stroop-BOLD response. They considered the main effect of group, image valence, and the interaction effect on brain activity measured during the incongruent vs. congruent number grid contrasts. As such, non-practitioners exhibited reduced activation in the left superior frontal gyrus (SFG) compared to yoga practitioners, irrespective of the valence of the distracting image. Furthermore, yoga practitioners displayed greater activation in the left ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (vlPFC) when a negative distractor was present compared to a neutral one, while non-practitioners showed the opposite pattern. This suggests that yoga might enhance cognitive flexibility and the ability to engage cognitive control when faced with emotional distractions. The vlPFC, in particular, is known to be crucial for cognitive control, particularly in the context of emotional interference (Aron, 2007). The study also noted that positive affect decreased from baseline to the end of the task in all participants; this decrease was positively correlated with left amygdala response to negative stimuli. Moreover, they found that this relationship between amygdala response and reduction

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in affect was greater in non practitioners, while not being present in yoga practitioners, suggesting further stabilization of emotional reactivity. This demonstrates a critical effect of yoga practice on emotional processing, suggesting emotional resilience and efficient modulation of affective responses, consistent with contemplative neuroscience literature (Lutz et al., 2008; Davidson & Lutz, 2008).

Functional Connectivity Findings

In contrast to the task-based fMRI studies, a recent cross-sectional study by Gothe et al. [31] utilized resting-state fMRI to investigate the relationship between yoga practice and functional brain connectivity, particularly in the context of aging. Given the vulnerability of the default mode network (DMN) to age-related changes and the interest in yoga as an anti-aging tool, healthy older adults with at least eight years of yoga experience were matched with age, education, and physical activity-matched yoga-naïve controls. The findings revealed that yoga practitioners displayed greater anteroposterior functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the right angular gyrus, key regions within the DMN. These connectivity patterns, often associated with self-referential processing and mind-wandering are often found to be decreased in typical aging. The observation of heightened connectivity in active yoga practitioners suggests that regular yoga practice may counteract age-related declines in functional brain connectivity. The DMN plays a crucial role in self-referential thought, and this increased frontoposterior connectivity may suggest a shift toward more flexible modes of thinking and self-awareness (Buckner et al., 2008). Importantly, the study cohort was predominately female, making it important to acknowledge that this result might be specific to older females due to the role that hormonal shifts play in brain aging processes (Brinton, 2015).

Longitudinal studies have further extended the inquiry into functional connectivity and yoga practice. Eyre et al. [32] used fMRI to assess changes following a 12-week yoga or memory-enhancement training program. Specifically, they aimed to determine whether gains in verbal memory recall were associated with alterations in brain connectivity. Both interventions showed increased connectivity within the DMN, specifically in the pregenual anterior cingulate cortex (pgACC), frontal medial cortex, posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), middle frontal gyrus (MFG), and lateral occipital cortex (LOC). They also reported increases in functional connectivity within the language network, with changes in the left inferior frontal gyrus (IFG). Furthermore, changes in connectivity and verbal memory recall were positively associated in key DMN and language networks across both groups. These results suggest that both memory enhancement training and yoga are effective in achieving changes in functional connectivity in regions associated with memory processes (Raichle et al., 2001). Interestingly, after removing an outlier from analysis, the associations between connectivity and memory recall in the PCC and IFG were no longer significant in the yoga group, highlighting the potential sensitivity of connectivity data to individual variations. It is important to note that while both groups demonstrated similar gains in cognitive function and increases in brain connectivity, it would be important to study whether these interventions have differential effects on other cognitive functions and overall wellbeing.

Critical Discussion and Future Directions

These studies, while limited, provide compelling support for the notion that yoga practice can induce functional changes in the brain, going beyond simple structural alterations. The observed effects span areas such as working memory, emotional reactivity, and resting-state connectivity, suggesting a broad impact on neural processing. However, several critical issues must be addressed for future research.

Firstly, the relative paucity of longitudinal functional studies represents a critical gap. While the cross-sectional studies provide valuable insights, longitudinal studies will be crucial to establish causality and the duration of these effects. It would be important to examine the longitudinal effects of various different forms of yoga (e.g. hatha, ashtanga, yin) to clarify which aspects of practice are associated with particular functional outcomes. Furthermore, most of these studies used small sample sizes, making it imperative to replicate these findings with larger, more diverse cohorts.

Secondly, there is a need to integrate multimodal data, combining measures of brain function, structure, genetics, and behavior. Such an integrated approach will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying the effects of yoga. This should be accompanied by the investigation of molecular pathways associated with increased connectivity and decreased stress reactivity. Future studies should also include control groups that are active, but do not practice yoga (e.g. aerobic exercise), to clarify if the reported effects are specific to the elements of mindfulness associated with yoga practice.

Thirdly, research needs to be more granular in identifying the specific elements of yoga practice–such as asana, pranayama, and meditation–that contribute to distinct functional changes. While the observed changes in connectivity are often linked to meditation practice, it is important to disaggregate their effects from the purely physical aspect of asana practice. This would allow for specific interventions that can achieve targeted cognitive or emotional goals. Additionally, it would be important to include measures of stress and anxiety in longitudinal studies to determine if these interventions are affecting the perception of stress and if that is associated with the observed functional changes.

In summary, the nascent field of research investigating the functional effects of yoga practice on brain function is promising. Current results have demonstrated that yoga practice is associated with changes in both cognitive and emotional processing, and increased brain connectivity, which are likely associated with improved cognitive and emotional outcomes. Although significant limitations persist, these initial findings provide the impetus for additional in-depth investigations using robust methodologies to uncover mechanisms underlying how yoga can promote brain health and overall wellbeing

Future Directions in Yoga and Cognitive Neuroscience: Advancing Rigor and Understanding

The nascent field of yoga-cognition demonstrates a promising avenue for exploring the interconnectedness of physical practice, mental discipline, and brain health. However, as the preceding analysis reveals, the current literature is characterized by methodological inconsistencies and a need for more rigorous experimental designs. While early studies establish a compelling rationale for further investigation, addressing the limitations outlined below is critical for advancing this field towards robust and translatable findings. This extended analysis delves into crucial areas for future research, emphasizing the need for standardization, nuanced experimental design, and the exploration of potential mediating factors.

1. Methodological Refinement and Standardization:

The challenge of comparing findings across studies is compounded by considerable heterogeneity. To address this, future research must prioritize the following:

- **Standardized Yoga Practice Definitions:** A critical need exists for clear and operationalized definitions of "yoga practitioner," specifying not only the frequency and duration of practice but also the nature of that practice. This should encompass the specific style of yoga (e.g., Hatha, Vinyasa, Kundalini), the balance of physical postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation/mindfulness practices. A standardized protocol for classifying yoga intensity and duration is also crucial.
  - **Table 1: Proposed Framework for Standardizing Yoga Practice Reporting**

Element	Category	Description
Style of Yoga	(e.g., Hatha, Vinyasa)	Primary yoga style practiced, accounting for variations within each style

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Element	Category	Description
Asana Emphasis	Low/Medium/High	Time/intensity of physical postures relative to the total practice
Pranayama Emphasis	Low/Medium/High	Focus/duration of breathing exercises relative to total practice
Meditation Emphasis	Low/Medium/High	Focus/duration of meditation/mindfulness relative to total practice
Frequency	(e.g., Days per week)	Number of sessions per week or month
Duration	(e.g., Minutes per session)	Length of each practice session
Years of Practice	(e.g., Years/Months)	Length of time practicing yoga habitually

- | Teacher Certification| (e.g., Hours/Type) | Level and type of certification/experience of the teaching instructor |
- **Standardized Practitioner Certification:** The absence of universally recognized yoga certification standards introduces potential bias. Future studies should document the certification level and training experience of yoga instructors to better control for variability in teaching approaches. This information can be used as a potential moderator of training effects on the brain.
- **Reporting of Compliance and Adherence:** Intervention studies must include robust measures of compliance with the yoga program. Attendance rates, home practice frequency, and adherence to specific yoga protocols should be systematically recorded and reported. Methods such as journaling, self-reports, and activity tracker data can be used to increase the reliability of this assessment.
- **Harmonization of Cognitive and Neuroimaging Protocols:** A concerted effort to standardize cognitive assessments and neuroimaging techniques is needed. This includes specifying cognitive domains of interest and ensuring consistency in the employed neuroimaging modalities (e.g., fMRI, EEG), parameters (e.g., data acquisition parameters, preprocessing steps), and analysis methods. Meta-analyses can be a powerful approach to synthesizing findings across studies, and will require standardization of protocols across studies.

2. Enhanced Experimental Designs:

Moving beyond the limitations of cross-sectional studies requires careful design choices:

- **Longitudinal Intervention Studies:** Longitudinal studies are essential to understand the causal relationship between yoga practice and changes in brain structure and function. These studies should follow participants over extended periods, tracking changes in both brain and cognitive measures. Future studies should consider using a waitlist control to eliminate potential confounds related to participant selection.
- **Active Control Groups:** Future studies should integrate active controls in addition to passive controls. A robust comparison with structured movement (e.g., aerobic exercise, resistance training) as well as a mindfulness-based control group will help dissect the unique contribution of yoga training on cognitive and neurological outcomes.

- **Dose-Response Relationships:** Investigations are needed to explore the effect of varying dosages of yoga practice on brain health. Such studies should manipulate factors like frequency, duration, and intensity to identify optimal intervention protocols to elicit maximal therapeutic effects.
- **Mechanisms of action**: The field should use a multi-modal approach to better understand the mechanisms driving the effects of yoga training on brain health and function. For example, markers of inflammation, oxidative stress, and neurotrophic factors could be measured before and after training to provide a deeper understanding of the biological effects of yoga.

3. The Influence of Confounding and Mediating Variables:

Acknowledging and controlling for confounding and mediating variables is essential for making accurate inferences about the effects of yoga practice. Future research should explore:

- **Lifestyle Factors:** Comprehensive data collection on lifestyle factors (diet, education level, physical activity, stress, sleep, smoking habits, etc.) is essential. Statistically modeling these factors will be necessary to evaluate their contribution to brain health in relation to yoga practice.
  - **Table 2: Lifestyle and Health Factors for Future Studies**

Variable	**Measurement Method**	**Justification**
Physical Activity	Questionnaires (e.g., IPAQ), Accelerometers	Quantify and control for the influence of physical activity on brain health
Diet	Food frequency questionnaires, dietary records	Analyze the impact of dietary patterns (vegetarian, plant-based) on brain function
Education Level	Demographic information	Account for the influence of education on both cognitive reserve and potential exposure to health behaviors
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Questionnaires	Address the potential impact of SES on health outcomes and access to health resources

- | Stress | Questionnaires (e.g., PSS) or Physiological Markers (e.g., cortisol)| Assess the role of chronic stress in modulating the effects of yoga practice | | Sleep | Questionnaires or wearable sleep tracker | Measure the influence of sleep quality and quantity on both brain health and response to training |
- **Psychological Factors:** It is necessary to go beyond the physical aspects of yoga and assess psychological variables such as motivation, affect, resilience, self-compassion, and mindset in relation to the practice of yoga. Interventional designs should assess these factors pre- and post-training to account for their potential influence on cognitive and neurological outcomes.
- **Social Factors:** Given that yoga is often community based, future studies should assess social variables such as social support, sense of community, and belonging among yoga practitioners and the potential impact of these variables.

4. Expanding the Scope of Investigation:

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- **Web-Based Interventions**: Investigating the effectiveness of web-based yoga interventions is critical, given the rise in telehealth services. Evaluation of effectiveness should consider fidelity to the practice protocols, adherence rates, and cognitive outcomes with online platforms.
- **Specific Populations:** Future studies should explore the efficacy of yoga interventions across a range of populations, including individuals with neurodegenerative disorders, mild cognitive impairment, anxiety, and/or depression. Targeted interventions and modified protocols may be required for these populations.
- **Active Ingredients**: It remains to be determined which elements of yoga (asanas, pranayama, and mindfulness/meditation) are driving the neuroprotective effects. Factorial experimental designs that manipulate the elements of yoga practice are needed to tease apart the unique contribution of these elements on cognitive and brain outcomes.

Conclusion:

The field of yoga-cognition stands at a critical juncture. While the current literature offers enticing preliminary findings, rigorous and systematic investigations are vital for translating these findings into meaningful clinical and public health benefits. By adopting methodological rigor, exploring nuanced experimental designs, and addressing potential confounding factors, we can advance our understanding of the complex relationship between yoga practice and brain health. The development of standardized methodologies, combined with sophisticated experimental designs and a focus on mechanistic explanations, is necessary to fulfill the promise of yoga as a tool for promoting cognitive well-being

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