



European Journal of Integrative Medicine 48 (2021) 101958

Experiences of online yoga for older adults with multi-morbidity in The Gentle Years Yoga Trial.

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Introduction: Covid-19 restrictions necessitated adapting the NIHR-funded Gentle Years Yoga trial for adults aged ≥ 65 years with multi-morbidity from face-to-face to online yoga classes. This study qualitatively explored participant and provider experiences and acceptability of this delivery format.

Methods: Yoga participants recruited for a 12-week online yoga intervention across four sites and the yoga teachers (YTs) delivering these classes were purposively sampled and consented. Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone, audio-recorded, independently transcribed, and thematically analysed.

Results: Interviews were conducted from October 2020 to January 2021 with four YTs, and 10 yoga participants aged 66-71 years with 2-5 chronic health conditions. Four themes predominated across all interviews. 1) IT skills. In contrast to perceived negative media portrayal, many participants were active engagers with computer technology, often self-taught in response to Covid-19 social restrictions. Engagement with the online yoga classes required minimal IT proficiency and identified issues appeared trial-related rather than skills-based. 2) Improved accessibility. No safety concerns and multiple accessibility benefits were associated with online classes. Many participants preferred online over face-to-face delivery as they removed transport, mobility, and acute health barriers. 3) Facilitated self-practice. Lack of external distractions associated with face-to-face classes enabled participants to better engage with a personal yoga practice. Many participants had integrated yoga into their daily routine and acute health management. 4) Teacher attributes. Communication limitations inherent with online delivery required a more interactive approach from YTs; engagement facilitators included simple instruction, physical demonstrations, and non-verbal feedback.

Conclusion: Online group-based yoga classes provided health and pragmatic benefits to multi-morbid older adults. Preferences for continued online options post-Covid, together with streamlining IT access, suggests online classes are both acceptable and sought by some older adults. Future exploration of online inclusion barriers will optimise accessibility in an older adult population.

Keywords: Older adults; Yoga; Multimorbidity; Clinical trial; Online

doi: [10.1016/j.eujim.2021.101958](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eujim.2021.101958)