

ASU researchers find yoga and Pilates associated with longer lifespans

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News
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Story highlights

ASU researchers examined 21 alternative health practices and their relationship to mortality.

Of the 21 practices examined, yoga and Pilates were the only two associated with a meaningfully lower risk of death.

Although the study found an association between yoga and Pilates and longer lifespans, further research is needed to determine whether there is causation.

Anti-aging advice is everywhere. After all, who doesn't want to live a longer, healthier life?

But according to Arizona State University researcher [Connor Sheehan](#), not every wellness practice promoted as a path to better health and longevity is backed by scientific evidence.

"Americans are spending billions on complementary and alternative medicine," said Sheehan, an associate professor in the [T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics](#). "More than 40% of adults use at least one practice, from acupuncture to chiropractic care to specialized diets. But we actually know very little about whether any of these practices are associated with living longer."

In a recently published [study](#), Sheehan and co-authors [Paul Espinoza](#) and ASU undergraduate Yuan Xie, together with other researchers, used nationally representative data from more than 55,000 U.S. adults, linked to mortality records over about a decade, to examine alternative health practices and their relationship to mortality.

The results?

Of the 21 practices studied, yoga and Pilates were the only two associated with a meaningfully lower risk of death. Yoga was linked to a 27% lower risk and Pilates to a 36% lower risk.

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gITcBMkt6dk>)

Most other practices — including acupuncture, massage and homeopathy — showed no significant association with mortality after researchers accounted for demographic and health differences between users and non-users.

Sheehan says the findings provide some of the first population-level evidence of alternative health practices that are associated with living longer.

“It also has a clean, counterintuitive angle,” he said. “Of all the alternative health practices out there, the two with the strongest longevity signal are ones rooted in physical movement, not the more exotic-sounding therapies.”

ASU News asked Sheehan why yoga and Pilates stood out, what might explain their connection to a lower risk of death and what the findings do — and don’t — tell us about living a longer life.

Note: The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Question: What prompted you to undertake this study?

Answer: If you spend a few minutes on social media, someone is always trying to sell you something that will make you younger, look better or live longer. The anti-aging and wellness industry is booming, but many of the claims lack strong scientific evidence.

We're all really living in our own little wellness bubbles, fully convinced that whatever we're doing is the key to longevity. Selfishly, I've been getting into the sauna, cold plunges and red light therapy lately, and I am curious if these actually work.

So we wanted to take a step back and ask the boring but important scientific question: Which of these practices are actually associated with living longer?

Q: Your study found that yoga and Pilates were the only individual complementary alternative medicine (CAM) practices associated with lower mortality. Why do you think that is?

A: I'll be honest, I was a little surprised by Pilates, because every Pilates class I've ever taken has made me feel like I was dying. But there are somewhat obvious reasons; first, yoga and Pilates are forms of exercise, and exercise is one of the most consistently proven ways to extend life. The other practices we examined, things like chiropractic care, massage and acupuncture, are not forms of exercise.

But I think yoga and Pilates also have something extra going for them: They build strength and balance, improve cardiovascular fitness and emphasize breath work and stress reduction, which have documented effects on inflammation and heart function.

And when taken in a class, there's a social component. We know that social connection is enormously protective for longevity. So you're potentially getting physical activity, stress management and community all wrapped into one practice.

That's a pretty good combination for living longer.

Q: The study found associations rather than causation. What does that distinction mean, and how should readers interpret your findings?

A: An association means that people who did yoga and Pilates tended to live longer. But it does not mean yoga and Pilates caused them to live longer. It's entirely possible that healthier people who were already on track to live longer just happened to be the ones signing up for yoga and Pilates classes.

There could also be some factor we didn't account for — maybe these folks are wealthier, have better access to health care or are genetically advantaged in some way. We controlled for a lot: income, education, exercise, smoking, BMI and self-rated health. But you can never control everything in an observational study, so we absolutely cannot definitively say yoga and Pilates cause people to live longer.

Over 40% of U.S. adults are using some form of complementary or alternative medicine, spending billions of dollars a year, and we have little population-level evidence on whether any of it matters for how long they live.

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Connor Sheehan, associate professor

T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics

Q: Could yoga and Pilates simply be markers of an overall healthier lifestyle rather than the reason people live longer?

A: Yes, absolutely. I think this is actually a big part of what we found. People who do yoga and Pilates are probably also eating well, sleeping well, not smoking and generally making a whole bunch of good decisions that reduce their risk of dying.

Maybe they're getting matcha after practice or using yoga to improve their running. Or flip it around: Maybe the sickest people are too unhealthy to do yoga or Pilates to begin with, so the practice looks protective when really it's just excluding the least healthy.

(Yoga and Pilates practitioners) are also less likely to be doing the things that increase mortality risk. So yoga and Pilates might just be a very visible flag that says, "This person takes care of themselves," rather than something that is causing someone to live longer.

Q: If readers learn only one thing from this study, what do you want it to be?

A: That the health behaviors Americans are doing to improve their well-being are really interesting, rapidly evolving and, I think, understudied. Over 40% of U.S. adults are using some form of complementary or alternative medicine, spending billions of dollars a year, and we have little population-level evidence on whether any of it matters for how long they live. And that's just the practices we studied. Think about everything that's exploded since then: peptides, red light therapy, specific supplements, cold plunging. We should be studying all of it.

Q: Did the study results encourage you to pull out your mat every week and start practicing yoga or Pilates?

A: I like to do yoga on YouTube. I have a few channels I really like, and I try to get a session in once a week.

But I think the potential benefit from yoga may come from the communal and social aspects of practicing in a group setting, and I'm just alone following along on a screen.

So either I'm leaving longevity benefits on the table or I'm proving that you can study something rigorously and still not fully follow your own findings. I think most people can relate to that.

Finally, I want to note that ASU offers both yoga and Pilates [group fitness classes](#). One of the co-authors of the study (Espinoza) even teaches fitness classes. So if anyone on the ASU campus is reading this and looking for a reason to sign up for yoga or Pilates, I just gave you one backed by 55,000 people and a decade of mortality data.

Why this research matters

Research is the invisible hand that powers America's progress. It unlocks discoveries and creates opportunity. It develops new technologies and new ways of doing things.

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This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Associate Professor Connor Sheehan practices on a Pilates reformer at the Sun Devil Fitness Complex on the Tempe campus. In a recent study, Sheehan and other researchers found that of 21 alternative health practices, only yoga and Pilates were associated with a significant decrease in the risk of death. Sheehan says the two activities offer not just exercise, but also improve balance, emphasize stress management and offer a social component — all key contributors to longevity. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



“Of all the alternative health practices out there, the two with the strongest longevity signal (yoga and Pilates) are ones rooted in physical movement, not the more exotic-sounding therapies,” ASU Associate Professor Connor Sheehan said. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



ASU doctoral student Paul Espinoza (front) and Associate Professor Connor Sheehan practice yoga at the Sun Devil Fitness Complex in Tempe. Both were involve in the study of alternative health practices and their relationship to mortality. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News