

Yoga helps older women balance and stand taller

By Anne Harding *Thu Apr 10, 3:02 PM ET*

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Elderly women showed measurable improvements in their walking speed and balance after a nine-week yoga program -- and they gained a centimeter in height, on average, Philadelphia researchers report.

"The only explanation may be that they are standing more upright, not so much crouching," study chief Dr. Jinsup Song of Temple University told Reuters Health. Song presented the findings April 4 at the Gait and Clinical Movement Analysis Society's Annual Meeting.

While past studies have investigated yoga for helping improve balance in elderly women, Song noted, they have typically used a relatively demanding form of the practice. In the current study, he and his colleague Marian Garfinkel, a certified yoga instructor, worked with B.K.S. Iyengar, the originator of Iyengar Yoga, to develop a program specifically designed for older people. "The poses were very basic -- how to stand upward, how to bend forward, sideways," said Song, who admitted he found some of the poses challenging himself.

Song and colleagues enrolled 24 women aged 65 and older into their study. The women performed an hour-and-a-half yoga session twice a week, gradually building up the intensity of the exercise.

After the program, the women walked faster, used longer strides, and could stand for a longer time on one leg. They also felt more confident in their ability to balance while standing and walking.

While the women had been balancing their weight on the ball of the foot as they walked before they had yoga training, afterwards their weight was more evenly distributed across the bottom of their feet as they walked, Song noted, which could contribute to greater stability.

Song, who is a podiatrist, noted that both strength and flexibility are important for helping people avoid falls, a leading cause of disability among older people, especially women. He and his colleagues are planning further studies to determine if the Iyengar program is an effective fall prevention strategy.