

Stronger. Calmer. Happier.

The Many Health Benefits of Yoga

The purpose of yoga is to build strength, awareness and harmony in both the mind and body. Although there are more than 100 different types, or schools, of yoga, most sessions typically include breathing exercises, meditation and assuming postures (sometimes called asanas or poses) that stretch and flex various muscle groups. Some styles may be more vigorous and energetic, whereas others focus more on relaxation and meditation. You may have to try more than one class to see what you like best.

Because there are so many different kinds of yoga practices, it is possible for anyone to start. Whether you're a couch potato or a professional athlete, size and fitness levels do not matter because there are modifications for yoga poses and beginner classes in every style. The idea is to explore your limits, not strive for some pretzel-like perfection. It is a great way to get in tune with your body and your inner self.

TYPES OF YOGA

You may prefer a certain type, depending on your goals and fitness level:

● Hatha yoga

This form of yoga is the most popular in the USA. It's known as the yoga of force. It emphasises strengthening and purifying the body. It involves physical postures (*asanas*) and breathing techniques (*pranayama*).

● Iyengar yoga

This style of yoga focuses on alignment. It is fluid and dancelike. It uses props like wooden blocks, straps, chairs, bolsters and blankets to help you achieve and hold postures you otherwise couldn't hold.

● Ashtanga yoga

This kind of yoga is sometimes called ashtanga vinyasa or power yoga. It's intense and fast-paced. It's designed

to build your endurance and strength. You do a series of postures in one continuous, flowing movement. You link the motions to breathing patterns.

● Bikram yoga

You do this form of yoga in a very hot room, unlike many other types of yoga. Bikram yoga involves a set of 26 postures that you practise twice per session. First you do standing and balance poses. Then you do back bends, forward bends and twisting postures.

● Restorative yoga

This type of yoga does not use active postures. It focuses instead on the relaxation part of yoga.

● Kripalu yoga

This is a gentler, slower-moving style of yoga. It's between restorative yoga and the more vigorous forms.

Yoga can help you get fit for life. It helps you deal with stress, pick up your child, control your dog, carry groceries or work in your garden. It can help to prevent or ease back pain and muscle or joint injury, headaches and give you self-reliance and self-esteem.

However, one of the most important benefits of any yoga routine isn't physical – it's the quieting of the mind. The bottom line is learning to pay attention. You fine-tune your attention, beginning with the body, and then moving to the mind. As you get deeper into your practice over the years, you start to see the mental and spiritual benefits.

THE MANY BENEFITS OF YOGA

1 Improve Flexibility and Mobility

The beauty of yoga is that it can be practised at all levels of ability. A few

minutes a day practising poses like the Warrior or the Downward-Facing Dog, will soon make you really feel the difference in your flexibility, whether you're pretty bendy already or not.

2 Build Strength

When thinking of improving your fitness, most of us think of huffing and puffing away at the gym. But weights are not the only way to work out. Daily yoga practice will help stretch and tone your body muscles. Popular poses like the plank simultaneously work on strengthening your arms, legs, shoulders and abs.

3 Correct Posture

Daily yoga helps improve your posture, making you walk taller and sit up straighter at your desk. Aches and pains caused by incorrect body posture, such as back pain, can also be alleviated. Improving strength, flexibility and posture will all combine to improve your balance and stability, reducing your risk of falls and injury.

4 Better All-Round Fitness

Yoga gives you all that a gym can, but in a peaceful, safe and more holistic way. It combines aspects of cardio, functional and strength training all in one. What more could you ask for? The best part about this workout is that it can be done at your own pace, in your own home.

5 Weight Loss

Everyday gentle yoga practice will fuel the metabolic system and will help burn fat, leading to weight loss. Daily yoga can also help restore the



hormonal balance in your body, which can help to normalise your body weight. Levels of cortisol, the hormone that is released in response to stress, will be lowered, leading to less overeating.

6 Cultivate Self-Awareness

Daily yoga also strengthens the mind-body connection and helps you deal more effectively with unpleasant emotions.

7 Increase Your Energy

The unique synergy of working your body with your breath in yoga is perfect when your reserves are running low. It will give you a much needed energy boost. Daily yoga practice will awaken the main energy centres (called *chakras*) in your body.

8 Reduce Stress

Any yoga practice, even a short daily one, can help manage stress. Regular yoga can result in lowered heart rate, giving your body the ability to respond to stress in a more flexible way, improved circulation and reduced blood pressure.

9 Sleep Better

Daily yoga practice can reduce insomnia. When experiencing insomnia, practise relaxing asanas or postures, such as forward fold (*uttanasana*) or lying on your back with your feet up the wall. Relaxing yoga poses combined with deep breathing will help calm both your body and mind for sleep.



10 Breathe Deeper

Breathing deeply and calmly is an essential part of every yoga practice. Yogic breathing techniques (called *pranayama*) focus on trying to slow down the breath and on breathing fully from the pit of your stomach to the top of your lungs.

These methods will make you feel more relaxed and balanced and will help you face the day with confidence and calm. They also have some great side benefits including increased lung capacity and more tidal volume (the total amount of air your lungs can hold at any one time).

You can adopt these techniques whenever needed in daily life. They can help you stay calm in emergency situations, think clearer in stressful situations and they can help reduce pain.

11 Support Your Immune System

Yoga lowers stress hormones levels in your body and calms the nervous system, resulting in decreased chronic inflammation by lowering the level of pro-inflammatory markers, such as cytokines. This will help boost your immune system and keep you healthy.

12 Be Happier

Practising regular yoga and meditation results in higher serotonin levels (the happy hormone) causing lower levels of depression and anxiety.

To put it simply, just 15 minutes of yoga a day can start changing your brain chemistry, improving your mood and level of contentment.

13 Become More Mindful

Yoga and mindfulness go hand in hand. When practising yoga, you will shift your awareness to the sensations, thoughts and emotions that accompany a given pose. That awareness will bring the mind back to the present moment – the main aim of mindfulness – where it can stay happy and focused.

Practising mindfulness has lasting physical and psychological benefits that are very much in line with the benefits of yoga. You will feel more calm and relaxed, and less stressed and anxious. You will experience higher levels of energy and



enthusiasm and more self-confidence and self-acceptance.

14 Improve Concentration

Yoga poses and meditation require you to concentrate on your breathing. This process of observing your breath calms your mind and makes you more mentally relaxed. As a result of this mental stability, you'll be able to recollect and retain more information. Meditating for just a few minutes in the morning can result in better concentration throughout the day.

15 Think More Clearly

By reducing mental stress and physical tension, we are able to remember things more easily and have more organised thoughts. Improved cognitive function results from clear, refreshed minds.

From a place of peace and calm, we are able to use our mental facilities more efficiently. Overall, by reducing mental stress and physical tension through daily yoga, you'll be able to think more sharply and have better organised thoughts.

16 Live Longer

As you now know, the benefits of daily yoga practice include increasing your level of fitness, regulating your heart rate, reducing stress levels and making you a happier person. All those elements may add valuable years to your life.

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