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The Health Benefits of Yoga

Yoga has been practiced for more than 5,000 years, and currently, close to 11 million Americans are enjoying its health benefits. Yoga can hardly be called a trend.

Most Westernized yoga classes focus on learning physical poses, which are called asanas. They also usually include some form of breathing technique and possibly a [meditation](#) technique as well. Some yoga classes are designed purely for relaxation. But there are styles of yoga that teach you how to move your body in new ways. Choosing one of these styles offers the greatest health benefits by enabling you to develop your flexibility, strength, and balance.

Before You Start: Staying Safe While Practicing Yoga

Even though for most healthy people yoga is a safe non-aerobic form of exercise, it is not without its risks. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, the yoga injuries most commonly treated in emergency rooms involve overstretching and strain from repetition to the:

- neck
- shoulders
- spine
- legs
- knees

Also, certain poses can increase your risk of injury if you have conditions such as:

- severe osteoporosis
- high or low blood pressure
- ear problems
- problems with your spine
- pregnancy (including risks to your unborn child)

Here are some tips to help you reduce your risk of injury from yoga:

If you are pregnant or have a pre-existing health condition: Consult your health care provider before

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starting a yoga program. Your health care provider can help you know how to judge what type and level of yoga exercise is safe for you.

Don't try learning yoga on your own. Work with an experienced and credentialed instructor to learn the proper way to perform the exercises and avoid injury.

Yoga is not a substitute for medical care. Yoga offers many health benefits and may even be included as part of some treatment plans. But it's still important to work closely with your regular health care providers and get proper treatment when you need it.

Know your limits and stay within them. Before beginning any new type of yoga, ask about its physical demands. Find out how strenuous it is. Talk with the instructor and others who do that type of yoga to be sure it's suitable for you.

Go slow. You're not in competition with anyone else in the class. Learn the basics, such as proper breathing and how to maintain balance, before you attempt the more ambitious stretches.

Warm up properly before every session. Cold muscles increase your chance of injury.

Wear proper clothing. Wear clothes that allow you to move freely.

Ask questions. If you don't understand an exercise, ask to see it again before you attempt it yourself.

Stay hydrated. That's especially important if you are practicing what's called "hot" yoga, which is done in a very warm and humid room.

Pay attention to what your body is telling you. Yoga isn't supposed to hurt. If you feel pain, stop. If the pain persists, see your health care provider. Stop immediately if you have chest pain, feel faint or overheated, or become dizzy. Get immediate medical help if the sensation continues after you stop.

Yoga and Flexibility

When some people think of yoga, they imagine having to stretch like a gymnast. That makes them worry that they're too old, unfit, or "tight" to do yoga. The truth is you're never too old to improve flexibility.

The series of yoga poses called asanas work by safely [stretching](#) your muscles. This may release the lactic acid that builds up with muscle use, which may cause stiffness, tension, pain, and [fatigue](#). In addition, yoga increases the range of motion in joints. It may also increase lubrication in the joints. The outcome is a sense of ease and fluidity throughout your body.

Yoga stretches not only your muscles but all of the soft tissues of your body. That includes ligaments, tendons, and the fascia sheath that surrounds your muscles. And no matter your level of yoga, you most likely will see benefits in a very short period of time. In one study, participants had up to 35% improvement in flexibility after only eight weeks of yoga. The greatest gains were in shoulder and trunk flexibility.

Yoga and Strength

Some styles of yoga, such as ashtanga and power yoga, are more vigorous than others. Practicing one of these styles will help you improve muscle tone.

But even less vigorous styles of yoga, such as Iyengar or hatha, which focuses on less movement and

more precise alignment in poses, can provide strength and endurance benefits.

Many of the poses, such as downward dog, upward dog, and the plank pose, build upper-body strength. This becomes crucial as people age. The standing poses, especially if you hold them for several long breaths, build strength in your hamstrings, quadriceps, and abdominal muscles. Poses that strengthen the lower back include upward dog and the chair pose. When practiced correctly, nearly all poses build core strength in the deep abdominal muscles.

Yoga Can Help Posture

With increased flexibility and strength comes better posture. Most standing and sitting poses develop core strength. That's because you're counting on your deep abdominals to support and maintain each pose. With a stronger core, you're more likely to sit and stand "tall." Another benefit of yoga is the increased body awareness. This heightened awareness tells you more quickly when you're slouching or slumping so you can adjust your posture.

Yoga Benefits Breathing

Because of the deep, mindful breathing that yoga involves, lung capacity often improves. This in turn can improve sports performance and endurance. But yoga typically isn't focused on [aerobic fitness](#) the way [running](#) or cycling are. Taking an intense power yoga class that gets you breathing hard in a heated room, however, can provide an aerobic benefit.

Most forms of yoga emphasize deepening and lengthening your breath. This stimulates the relaxation response -- the opposite of the fight-or-flight adrenaline boost of the stress response.

Yoga Means Less Stress, More Calm

Even beginners tend to feel less stressed and more relaxed after their first class. Some yoga styles use specific meditation techniques to quiet the constant "mind chatter" that often underlies stress. Other yoga styles depend on deep breathing techniques to focus the mind on the breath. When this happens, the mind calms.

Among yoga's anti-stress benefits are a host of biochemical responses. For example, there is a decrease in catecholamines, the hormones produced by the adrenal glands in response to stress. Lowering levels of hormone neurotransmitters -- dopamine, norepinephrine, and epinephrine -- creates a feeling of calm. Some research points to a boost in the hormone oxytocin. This is the so-called "trust" and "bonding" hormone that's associated with feeling relaxed and connected to others.

Yoga, Concentration, and Mood

Harder to pin down and research scientifically, concentration and the ability to focus mentally are common benefits you'll hear yoga students talk about. The same is true with mood. Nearly every yoga student will tell you they feel happier and more contented after class. Recently, researchers have begun exploring the effects of yoga on depression, a benefit that may result from yoga's boosting oxygen levels to the brain. Yoga is even being studied as an adjunct therapy to relieve symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Yoga's Benefits the Heart

Perhaps one of the most studied areas of the health benefits of yoga is its effect on [heart disease](#). Yoga has long been known to lower blood pressure and slow the heart rate. A slower heart rate can benefit

people with high blood pressure, heart disease, and [stroke](#). Yoga was a key component to the heart disease program designed by Dean Ornish, MD. This was the first program to partly reverse heart disease through lifestyle and diet rather than surgery. On a biochemical level, studies point to a possible anti-oxidant effect of yoga. And yoga has been associated with decreased [cholesterol](#) and triglyceride levels as well as a boost in immune system function.

Yoga's Effects on Other Medical Conditions

As yoga has become more popular in the West, medical researchers have begun studying the benefits of therapeutic yoga. This is also called integrative yoga therapy or IYT. It's used as an adjunct treatment for specific medical conditions, from clinical depression to heart disease. Yoga benefits other chronic medical conditions, relieving [symptoms of asthma](#), [back pain](#), and [arthritis](#). Most worldwide clinical studies are happening outside of the U.S. But even the NIH has funded clinical trials on yoga and its health benefits for [insomnia](#) and [multiple sclerosis](#).

Other Benefits of Yoga

Some studies have suggested that yoga may have a positive effect on learning and memory. Other researchers have been studying whether yoga can slow the aging process, increase a person's sense of self-acceptance, or improve energy levels.

Some potential benefits of yoga may be hard to study scientifically. For instance, yoga has been said to increase spiritual awareness. Nevertheless, there is an abundance of anecdotal claims for what yoga can do. Go to any yoga studio and listen to students after class. Some will even tell you that yoga can help improve marriages and [relationships](#) at work.

The only way to be certain of all that yoga can do for you is to try it for yourself and see.

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Reviewed by [Andrew Seibert, MD](#) on May 10, 2012

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