

Why You Should Try Yoga

What is yoga, and why is it so popular? Yoga is a series of stretches and poses that you do with breathing techniques. It offers the powerful benefits of exercise. And since yoga is gentle, almost anyone can do it, regardless of your age or fitness level.

Yoga is a 5,000-year-old discipline from India. It was developed as a practice to unite the mind and body. There are many branches of yoga. All yoga styles can help balance your body, mind, and spirit, but they achieve it in various ways.

Some yoga styles are intense and vigorous. Others are relaxing and meditative. No matter which type you choose, yoga is a great way to stretch and strengthen your body, focus your mind, and relax your spirit.

Benefits of yoga

Yoga can make you stronger and more flexible. It's a great way to stay limber and energetic. You'll also feel more focused and alert. And yoga can help you feel great and function better in your daily life. Yoga can also help improve these conditions:

- Poor blood circulation
- High blood pressure
- Arthritis
- Osteoporosis
- Limited mobility
- Lower back pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Headaches
- Tension or stress
- Depression

Yoga's gentle movements are a big reason for why it's so popular. Yoga is good for people who haven't been active in a while. It's good for people who have certain health conditions like arthritis or osteoporosis. You can change the exercises to fit your needs. But yoga is also great if you're already fit and want a challenging workout. As you become more strong and flexible with yoga, it's easier to do other kinds of exercise like dancing, walking, or swimming.

Yoga can help you:

- **Reduce your risk for injury.** Each yoga pose targets specific muscles. This helps you increase your flexibility and reduce your risk for injury.
- **Reduce stress.** Yoga can help soothe the mind and lower stress levels. It does this by focusing the mind on the moment and the movements.
- **Increase your concentration.** A main part of yoga is rhythmic, focused breathing. This can help you focus.
- **Understand the mind and body connection.** Yoga requires you to focus all your energy on each movement or pose exactly. This can help you feel the mind and body work together.
- **Gain strength and stamina.** More vigorous styles of yoga promote strength and stamina.
- **Improve balance and stability.** Balancing poses require you to use your core muscles. This can help you improve your overall stability.
- **Improve posture.** Yoga poses strengthen and open tight areas of the body like the shoulders and muscles of the upper back. This can help you keep good posture.
- **Develop body awareness.** Yoga requires you to contract or relax specific muscles as you stretch into each pose. This can help you become more aware of your body's strengths and weaknesses.

Types of yoga

You have many types of yoga to choose from. They use different kinds of movements called poses. 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 U.S. It's known as the yoga of force. It emphasizes 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 1 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 practice 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.

Strength-training with yoga

Many people think yoga is essentially a stretching regimen. It is that, but it's also much more. How do you strengthen your muscles with yoga? Simply by getting into a yoga posture and holding it. Yoga can give you stronger muscles with poses such as:

- **Downward facing dog pose.** This strengthens your arms and legs.
- **Half moon pose.** This strengthens your legs and ankles.
- **Plank pose.** This strengthens your arms, wrists, and back.
- **Locust pose.** This strengthens the back of your torso, legs, and arms.

How to get started

It's easy to find all kinds of yoga classes. Check with your local community centers. Look at nearby gyms, dance studios, and health clubs. Or, check out Yoga Journal's Yoga Teacher Directory to see regional and national lists of yoga teachers and associations.

It is important to find the right yoga style for you and a teacher you like. It's hard to know what a class is like until you attend it. Even when 2 teachers use the same terms to describe their classes, the classes may be quite different.

Talk with your health care provider before you begin yoga or any other kind of exercise. It's a good idea to take a class with an experienced teacher. Let the teacher know about any health conditions you may have like high blood pressure or arthritis. Tell him or her about any injuries or physical problems. A good teacher will know which exercises are best for you, and tell you which poses to avoid.

Give it a try

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 also can help to prevent or ease back pain and muscle or joint injury, and give you self-reliance and self-esteem.

Yet, 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.

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