

BENEFITS OF YOGA

You've probably heard that yoga is good for you. Maybe you have even tried yoga and discovered that it makes you feel better. But what are the specific health benefits can you expect to enjoy from doing yoga regularly?

Physical Benefits

Flexibility: Stretching your tight body in new ways will help it to become more flexible, bringing greater range of motion to muscles and joints. Over time, you can expect to gain flexibility in your hamstrings, back, shoulders, and hips.

Strength: Many yoga poses require you to support the weight of your own body in new ways, including balancing on one leg (such as in Tree Pose) or supporting yourself with your arms (such as in Downward Facing Dog). Some exercises require you to move slowly in and out of poses, which also increases strength.

Muscle tone: As a by-product of getting stronger, you can expect to see increased muscle tone. Yoga helps shape long, lean muscles.

Pain Prevention: Increased flexibility and strength can help prevent the causes of some types of back pain. Many people who suffer from back pain spend a lot of time sitting at a computer or driving a car. That can cause tightness and spinal compression, which you can begin to address with yoga. Yoga also improves your alignment, both in and out of class, which helps prevent many other types of pain.

Better Breathing: Most of us breathe very shallowly into the lungs and don't give much thought to how we breathe. Yoga breathing exercises, called Pranayama, focus the attention on the breath and teach us how to better use our lungs, which benefits the entire body. Certain types of breath can also help clear the nasal passages and even calm the central nervous system, which has both physical and mental benefits.

Mental Benefits

Mental Calmness: Yoga asana practice is intensely physical. Concentrating so intently on what your body is doing has the effect of bringing a calmness to the mind. Yoga also introduces you to meditation techniques, such as watching how you breathe and disengagement from your thoughts, which help calm the mind.

Stress Reduction: Physical activity is good for relieving stress, and this is particularly true of yoga. Because of the concentration required, your daily troubles, both large and small, seem to melt away during the time you are doing yoga. This provides a much-needed break from your stressors, as well as helping put things into perspective. The emphasis yoga places on being in the moment can also help relieve stress, as you learn not to dwell on past events or anticipate the future. You will leave a yoga class feeling less stressed than when you started. Read more about yoga for stress management [here](#).

Body Awareness: Doing yoga will give you an increased awareness of your own body. You are often called upon to make small, subtle movements to improve your alignment. Over time, this will increase your level of comfort in your own body. This can lead to improved posture and greater self-confidence.

Yoga has long been known to be a great antidote to stress. Yoga combines many popular stress-reducing techniques, including exercise and learning to control the breath, clear the mind, and relax the body. As yoga becomes increasingly popular, more and more people are discovering the benefits this ancient practice brings to their stressful lives.

Exercise

Hatha yoga is the physical practice of yoga postures. There are many different types of hatha yoga: some are slow and more focused on stretching, others are fast and more of a workout. If you are looking to relieve stress, no one yoga style is superior, so pick one that meets your level of physical fitness and personality. Any exercise will help relieve stress by keeping the body healthy and releasing endorphins, natural hormones that make you feel better. Yoga also relieves stress through stretching. When you are stressed, tension is stored in the body making you feel

tight and often causing pain. The intense stretching of yoga releases tension from problem areas, including the hips and shoulders.

Breathe Control

Pranayama, or breath work, is an important part of any yoga practice and one that translates well to life off the mat. Yoga increases your awareness of the breath as a tool for relaxing the body. Although breathing is an involuntary act (you have to keep doing it to stay alive), you can choose to regulate the breath. Just learning to take deep breaths and realizing that this can be a quick way to combat stressful situations is amazingly effective.

Clearing the Mind

Our minds are constantly active, racing from one thought to another, spinning possible scenarios for the future, dwelling on incidents from the past. All this mind work is tiring and stressful. Yoga offers several techniques for taming the monkey mind. One is breath work, as outlined above. Each breath is tied inextricably to the present moment; you are not breathing in the past or the future, but only right now. Focusing on each inhale and exhale to the exclusion of other thoughts is one way to clear the mind. It is also a basic meditation technique. In addition, the performance of yoga poses, or asanas, also acts as a form of meditation. The poses are so physical, and have to be done with such concentration, that all other thoughts and worries are put to the side, giving your brain a much-needed break.

Relaxation

Each yoga session ends with five to ten minutes spent relaxing in corpse pose - savasana. While this enforced relaxation can be difficult at first, eventually it serves the purpose of a total release for both body and mind. Savasana transitions you back into the world feeling refreshed and equipped with the tools to combat stress in your daily life.

Smith C, Hancock H, Blake-Mortimer J, Eckert K. "A randomised comparative trial of yoga and relaxation to reduce stress and anxiety."