

Yoga Basics & Benefits

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Most individuals practice yoga on the recommendation of a doctor or friend or because of a physical or mental condition. Yoga, however, can be beneficial for everyone. Yoga helps optimize overall health and well-being. One needs to approach Yoga with an open mind and a willingness to learn new ways to help prevent or minimize any pain, injury or physical limitation.

A person practicing Yoga need not be flexible or fit; that will come with practice. When first starting out, one needs to learn the basics rather than rushing in to practicing in an intermediate or advance class or posture. Participating in a class that is best suited for one's needs and level will increase the benefits of the practice while preventing injuries.

Yoga involves asanas, pranayama and meditation. All the components are synergistic with each other and help with improving the health and connection of body and mind.

Asanas are the physical postures. Asanas help balance the body and distribute flexibility and strength throughout the body. The physical postures work on the outside as well as the internal body. There are over 900 asanas and the following are just a few examples along with their conditioning and effects on the body system. Standing postures such as Tree Pose and Warrior Poses help with balancing and strengthening the muscles especially in the lower body. Downward Dog stretches the palms, chest, back, hamstring and calves and feet, strengthens the arms, wrists, legs and torso and relieves lower back discomfort. Twist postures such as Revolved Side Angle Pose and Sage Twist help develop shoulder flexibility, tone the abdominal organs and stimulates intestinal function improving digestion and alleviating constipation. Cat/Cow Pose brings awareness and flexibility to the entire spine. Elevated Legs Up The Wall is an easy and effective way to relieve tension of the day and alleviate the symptoms of edema or varicose veins.

Pranayama is the breathwork that can be practiced anytime to help energize, calm and even minimize pain and discomfort. Our breath is our most vital life force. We can go days without food or water but only several minutes without our breath. During our everyday activities we do not usually think about our breath as it occurs automatically. During our Yoga practice we work on bringing conscious awareness of our breath. We control the length of inhalation, exhalation and sometimes use breath retention and forceful exhalation. The various methods improve respiratory capacity and help balance our nervous system which is a major component in relieving stress.

Meditation enables us to bring peace into our mind and body. Meditation does not mean an emptying the mind and no thoughts, but rather a clearing of it, a time to be a witness or observer of our thoughts without attachment. Meditation is a time to allow oneself to remain still and become aware of our thoughts as they appear on our mindscape, by allowing thoughts to float up and away as if they were clouds in a sky without judgment or problem solving. It is a way to “re-boot” our system, letting go of thoughts that are from our conscious and subconscious mind. Every meditation and meditator have different experiences with each practice ; however, most report a sense of tranquility and a feeling more peaceful and calm immediately after the practice and the rest of the day. Meditation has been correlated with greater levels of happiness, better immune function, more flexibility in outlook and temperament. In addition, guided meditation and imagery can help facilitate positive bodily and mental changes.

One does not need to twist into a “pretzel-like” poses, retain their breath for 15 minutes or meditate for hours to receive the benefits of Yoga. Practicing to the best of one’s ability and awareness will result in self-acceptance and self-transformation enhancing physical and mental health & well-being.

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