

## Yoga - health benefits

Yoga is an ancient Indian philosophy that dates back thousands of years. It was designed as a path to spiritual enlightenment, but in modern times the physical aspects of Hatha yoga have found huge popularity as a gentle form of exercise and stress management. There are many different varieties of Hatha yoga, but each one essentially relies on structured poses (asanas) practised with breath awareness.

Researchers have discovered that the regular practice of yoga may produce many health benefits, including increased fitness and normalisation of blood pressure. Yoga is a renowned antidote to stress. Over time yoga practitioners report lower levels of stress and increased feelings of happiness and wellbeing. This is because concentrating on the postures and the breath acts as a powerful form of meditation.

### The asanas

Each posture, or asana, is held for a period of time and synchronised with the breath. Generally, a yoga session begins with gentle asanas and works up to the more vigorous or challenging postures. A full yoga session should exercise every part of the body and should include pranayama (breath control practices), relaxation and meditation. The different postures or asanas include:

- Lying postures
- Sitting postures
- Standing postures
- Inverted, or upside down postures.

### A range of benefits

The physical building blocks of yoga are the posture (asana) and the breath. A series of poses held over a period of time and synchronised with the breath exercises every part of the body. Benefits include:

- **Cardiovascular system** (heart and arteries) - asanas are isometric, which means they rely on holding muscle tension for a short period of time. This improves cardiovascular fitness and circulation. Studies show that regular yoga practise may help normalise blood pressure.
- **Digestive system** - improved blood circulation and the massaging effect of surrounding muscles speeds up a sluggish digestion.
- **Musculo-skeletal** - joints are moved through their full range of motion, which encourages mobility and eases pressure. The gentle stretching releases muscle tension and increases flexibility. Maintaining many of the asanas encourages strength and endurance. Weight bearing asanas may help prevent osteoporosis, and may also help those already diagnosed with osteoporosis, practised with care, under the supervision of a qualified Yoga teacher. Long term benefits include reduced back pain and improved posture.
- **Nervous system** - improved blood circulation, easing of muscle tension and the act of focusing the mind on the breath all combine to soothe the nervous system. Long term benefits include reduced stress and anxiety levels, and increased feelings of calm and wellbeing.

### Anyone can practise yoga

Yoga is non-competitive and suitable for anyone, regardless of their age or fitness level. Your yoga teacher should carefully guide and observe you and modify postures when necessary. An asana should never cause pain. If it hurts, ease back on the stretch or don't do it at all. It is important to keep within your physical limits. If you are over 40, haven't exercised for a long time or have a pre-existing medical condition, you should check with your doctor before starting any regular exercise routine.

## Different classes

There are many different varieties of yoga, each one with a slightly different slant. Hatha yoga is one of the more popular forms in Australia. Yoga is taught in classes, catering for beginners through to advanced practitioners. Suggestions for getting the most out of your class include:

- Wear comfortable clothes and take a blanket, since many poses are performed sitting or lying down.
- Allow at least three or four hours since your last meal.
- Always tell your yoga teacher if you have a specific complaint, so they can advise against any asanas that may aggravate your problem.
- Always tell your yoga teacher if you are pregnant, have had a recent injury, illness, surgery, high blood pressure, heart problems, or osteoporosis.
- Don't talk during the class because it will disturb your own quiet focus and that of others in the class.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Other health professionals
- A qualified yoga teacher

## Things to remember

- Yoga is an ancient science of living that incorporates gentle exercise, breath control (breathing practices called pranayama) and meditation.
- The physical foundation of yoga is a series of structured poses (asanas) performed with breath awareness.
- The health benefits of regular yoga practice may include alleviation of high blood pressure, improved posture and circulation, and a sense of wellbeing.



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