

Yoga for Health: An Introduction

Yoga is a mind-body practice in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) with origins in ancient Indian philosophy. The various styles of yoga that people use for health purposes typically combine physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation or relaxation. This Backgrounder provides a general overview of yoga and suggests sources for more information.

Key Points

- People use yoga for a variety of health conditions and to achieve fitness and relaxation.
- It is not fully known what changes occur in the body during yoga; whether they influence health; and if so, how. There is, however, growing evidence to suggest that yoga works to enhance stress-coping mechanisms and mind-body awareness. Research is under way to find out more about yoga's effects, and the diseases and conditions for which it may be most helpful.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

Overview

Yoga in its full form combines physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, and a distinct philosophy. Yoga is intended to increase relaxation and balance the mind, body, and the spirit.

Early written descriptions of yoga are in Sanskrit, the classical language of India. The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means “yoke or union.” It is believed that this describes the union between the mind and the body. The first known text, *The Yoga Sutras*, was written more than 2,000 years ago, although yoga may have been practiced as early as 5,000 years ago. Yoga was originally developed as a method of discipline and attitudes to help people

reach spiritual enlightenment. The *Sutras* outline eight limbs or foundations of yoga practice that serve as spiritual guidelines:

1. *yama* (moral behavior)
2. *niyama* (healthy habits)
3. *asana* (physical postures)
4. *pranayama* (breathing exercises)
5. *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal)
6. *dharana* (concentration)
7. *dhyana* (contemplation)
8. *samadhi* (higher consciousness)

The numerous schools of yoga incorporate these eight limbs in varying proportions. Hatha yoga, the most commonly practiced in the United States and Europe, emphasizes two of the eight limbs: postures (*asanas*) and breathing exercises (*pranayama*). Some of the major styles of hatha yoga include Ananda, Anusara, Ashtanga, Bikram, Iyengar, Kripalu, Kundalini, and Viniyoga.

Use of Yoga for Health in the United States

A 2002 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) on adult Americans' use of CAM found that yoga is one of the top 10 CAM modalities used. Nearly 8 percent of the more than 31,000 survey participants had ever used yoga for health; adjusted to nationally representative numbers, this means more than 15.2 million adults.

People use yoga for a variety of health conditions including anxiety disorders or stress, asthma, high blood pressure, and depression. People also use yoga as part of a general health regimen—to achieve physical fitness and to relax.

The Status of Yoga Research

Research suggests that yoga might:

- Improve mood and sense of well-being
- Counteract stress
- Reduce heart rate and blood pressure
- Increase lung capacity
- Improve muscle relaxation and body composition
- Help with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and insomnia
- Improve overall physical fitness, strength, and flexibility
- Positively affect levels of certain brain or blood chemicals.

More well-designed studies are needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn about yoga's use for specific health conditions.

Side Effects and Risks

- Yoga is generally considered to be safe in healthy people when practiced appropriately. Studies have found it to be well tolerated, with few side effects.
- People with certain medical conditions should not use some yoga practices. For example, people with disc disease of the spine, extremely high or low blood pressure, glaucoma, retinal detachment, fragile or atherosclerotic arteries, a risk of blood clots, ear problems, severe osteoporosis, or cervical spondylitis should avoid some inverted poses.
- Although yoga during pregnancy is safe if practiced under expert guidance, pregnant women should avoid certain poses that may be problematic.

Training, Licensing, and Certification

There are many training programs for yoga teachers throughout the country. These programs range from a few days to more than 2 years. Standards for teacher training and certification differ depending on the style of yoga.

There are organizations that register yoga teachers and training programs that have complied with minimum educational standards. For example, one nonprofit group requires at least 200 hours of training, with a specified number of hours in areas including techniques, teaching methodology, anatomy, physiology, and philosophy. However, there are currently no official or well-accepted licensing requirements for yoga teachers in the United States.

If You Are Thinking About Yoga

- Do not use yoga as a replacement for conventional care or to postpone seeing a doctor about a medical problem.
- If you have a medical condition, consult with your health care provider before starting yoga.
- Ask about the physical demands of the type of yoga in which you are interested, as well as the training and experience of the yoga teacher you are considering.
- Look for published research studies on yoga for the health condition you are interested in.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

NCCAM-Funded Research

Recent studies supported by NCCAM have been investigating yoga's effects on:

- Blood pressure
- Chronic low-back pain
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

- Depression
- Diabetes risk
- HIV
- Immune function
- Inflammatory arthritis and knee osteoarthritis
- Insomnia
- Multiple sclerosis
- Smoking cessation.

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For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

The NCCAM Clearinghouse provides information on CAM and NCCAM, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: nccam.nih.gov

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

PubMed®

A service of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), PubMed contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals. CAM on PubMed, developed jointly by NCCAM and NLM, is a subset of the PubMed system and focuses on the topic of CAM.

Web site: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez

CAM on PubMed: nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/

ClinicalTrials.gov

ClinicalTrials.gov is a database of information on federally and privately supported clinical trials (research studies in people) for a wide range of diseases and conditions. It is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Web site: www.clinicaltrials.gov

NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus

To provide resources that help answer health questions, MedlinePlus brings together authoritative information from the National Institutes of Health as well as other Government agencies and health-related organizations.

Web site: www.medlineplus.gov

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