



# Yoga

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Yoga is a form of exercise that has been practiced for thousands of years. In western societies, yoga is sometimes considered a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), and millions of yoga practitioners through the centuries provide a testament to this activity's health benefits. In recent years, there has been a push from organizations such as the National Institutes of Health to document specific health benefits of yoga and other CAMs.

The origins of yoga come from Indian and Hindu traditions and center around the unity of mind, body, and spirit. Practicing yoga involves achieving specific body positions (*asanas*), controlling breathing (*pranayama*), and meditation. There are many forms of yoga with different degrees of focus on physical, mental, and spiritual elements. Hatha yoga is the most commonly practiced form of yoga in the United States, and within hatha yoga exist several styles (e.g., Ananda, Bikram, Viniyoga). According to a recent ACSM study, yoga is a hot trend in the fitness industry, and many fitness professionals expect that its popularity will continue to climb. Given the popularity of this form of exercise, is there evidence to support claims that it improves health? Although researchers continue to gather additional information about the health benefits of yoga, the following have been demonstrated.

### IMPROVED MENTAL STATE

Many investigations have provided evidence that yoga can result in improved psychological well-being. Among the benefits found are decreased feelings of stress, lower depression, increased sense

of well-being, and less anxiety. Because of these emotional, as well as the many physical, benefits, yoga is being used in the treatment of many chronic diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and human immunodeficiency virus disease.

### BLOOD PRESSURE

Although the mechanisms for the change remain unknown, studies report that blood pressure can be lowered through yoga. Investigators continue to explore how yoga can be combined with medications and other forms of exercise to fight hypertension.

### IMPROVED FLEXIBILITY

One of the most consistently reported outcomes from yoga training is improved flexibility. This is not surprising given the large range of motion required in some yoga poses. The slow and controlled movements associated with most forms of yoga provide an effective approach to increasing flexibility.

### IMPROVED MUSCULOSKELETAL FITNESS

The poses required of yoga practitioners lead to increases in muscular strength and endurance. Increases in arm and leg strength and endurance have been reported with yoga, but another key area for improvement is the body's core. The abdominal muscles, muscles in the back, and the muscles controlling hip and shoulder movements are developed through yoga training. These improvements have been linked with improved posture and protection from low-back pain.

Yoga training is available in many health and fitness centers. Because there is great variety in the styles of yoga, it is recommended that you explore various options to see what best suits your needs. Inquire about the instructor's credentials. As you are learning yoga, it is important that you train with someone who is able to correct your form. In addition, check with your health care provider if you experience chronic medical conditions to make sure that yoga is safe for you.

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