Health benefits of yoga [1]

Alice,

What are the health benefits of yoga?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The word *yoga* means "to bring together or merge" as in joining the mind and body into a single harmonious unit. The general purpose is to create physical and spiritual strength and awareness. However, more than one hundred different types, or schools, of yoga exist and each form provides its own unique cocktail of health benefits.

Most yoga sessions are typically comprised of breathing exercises, meditation, and assuming postures (sometimes called poses) that stretch and flex various muscle groups. According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of the National Institutes of Health [2], [3] relaxation techniques, such as those practiced in yoga, can:

- Lessen chronic pain, such as lower back pain, arthritis, headaches, and carpal tunnel syndrome
- Lower blood pressure and heart and breathing rates
- Reduce insomnia

Students of yoga also generally report:

- Higher levels of energy and muscle endurance
- Decreased levels of stress and anxiety
- Increased feelings of general well-being
- Increased flexibility, balance, and mental focus

To get the most out of yoga, those with physical limitations (i.e., chronic conditions, pregnancy) may want to consult a health care provider and/or yoga instructor for suggestions on the best yoga styles to pursue. In all, to find the right type of yoga for you, ask yourself a few questions:

1. Is physical fitness your goal? If you're looking to tone up or shed a few pounds, Power, Ashtanga, or Bikram ("hot yoga") may be a good fit for you. Though not likely to give you much of an aerobic workout or to greatly increase your muscle strength, these forms will
get your blood circulating and your body sweating. Those with hypertension or diabetes should consult a health care provider before delving into these forms of yoga.

2. Do you have any injuries or chronic conditions? Are you and the gym not on good terms right now? Maybe you're new to yoga and want to ease yourself into it before heading straight for the more pretzel-y poses. If this is the case, gentler forms that focus on body alignment and breathing such as iyengar, Kripalu, or Viniyoga may be the best option.

3. Perhaps the physical health component of yoga is secondary for you and you're looking more for the spiritual health benefits. In this case, you may want to look into Kundalini yoga, which focuses on chanting, meditation, and philosophic aspects of yogic practice.

There are many more styles of yoga, and depending on what your personal goals are, the health benefits may vary. For more information about different methods of yoga and how to select the one for you, check out the Yoga Alliance [4] website. The whole idea of yoga is to create balance and harmony between the mind and the body, so shop around to see which forms make you feel the best.

Since there are so many different types of yoga, there is no straightforward answer to your question. However, by assessing what you want to get out of your individual yoga practice, you ought to find a style that fits your goals. Namaste!

Alice!

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