

YOGA IS FOR EVERYONE

It's time to roll out your yoga mat and discover the combination of physical and mental exercises that for thousands of years have hooked yoga practitioners around the globe. The beauty of yoga is that you don't have to be a yogi or yogini to reap the benefits. Whether you are young or old, overweight or fit, yoga has the power to calm the mind and strengthen the body. Don't be intimidated by yoga terminology, fancy yoga studios and complicated poses. Yoga is for everyone.

YOGA 101

A set of specific exercises, called poses, combined with specific breathing techniques and meditation principles are the building blocks of a yoga class. If a pose causes pain or proves too difficult, there are variations and modifications that can be made to help students. Props like blocks, blankets and straps — even chairs — can be used to help you get the most benefit from the poses. Yoga is not one-size-fits-all: The best yoga workout for you will depend on your individual needs and goals.

The benefits of a regular yoga practice are wide-ranging. In general, a complete yoga workout can help keep your back and joints healthy, improve your overall posture, stretch and strengthen muscles and improve your balance, says Roger Cole, Ph.D., a psychobiologist and certified Iyengar yoga teacher. Yoga also has “a restorative side that is deeply relaxing and rejuvenating,” Dr. Cole says. “Relaxation is built into every yoga session.”

In addition, yoga's focus on the breath can calm you and help you learn to be more mindful of your body, says Dr. Timothy McCall, the author of “Yoga as Medicine,” and that can help you to move with greater ease.

In recent years, more and more research is demonstrating the wide-ranging health benefits of yoga.

Studies show that yoga can help:

- **1. Reduce back pain:** [Weekly yoga classes](#) [relieve symptoms](#) of low back pain about as well as intense, regular stretching sessions.
- **2. Strengthen bones:** In [one small study](#), yoga practitioners were shown to have increased bone density in their spine and hips, compared to people in a control group.
- **3. Improve balance:** Male athletes [in one study](#) displayed better balance after 10 weeks of

- yoga classes than a control group of athletes who did not change their routines.
- **4. Stave off mental decline:** [In one study](#), participants who did a combination of yoga and meditation as opposed to a brain-training exercise performed much better on a test of visuospatial memory, a type of remembering that is important for balance, depth perception and the ability to recognize objects and navigate the world.
 - **5. Reduce stress:** A [study](#) of 72 women found that Iyengar yoga helped reduce mental distress and the related psychological and physical symptoms of stress.
 - **6. Relieve depression:** In [a study](#) of coal miners with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or C.O.P.D., yoga was shown to alleviate depression and anxiety.

ANCIENT, BUT NOT FOREIGN

Yoga is tied to ancient Indian philosophy, so yoga poses have both Sanskrit and English names — *adho mukha svanasana* is more commonly known as downward-facing dog, for example — and you may hear both in a class.

But even if you have never tried a yoga class, you may already be familiar with some yoga poses. Ever tried a plank? You've done yoga.

Trainers and fitness classes around the world, not to mention college and professional sports teams, are including yoga into more traditional workouts as a potent form of mind-body conditioning, helping athletes to breathe better and increase their focus.

The [Seattle Seahawks](#) and Los Angeles Clippers, for example, practice yoga in a team setting, and many top sports professionals, including the basketball star [LeBron James](#) and the tennis champion [Novak Djokovic](#) have incorporated yoga into their training programs.

“The attention-focusing and alignment-honing potential of a yoga practice is a solid complement to more athletic, explosive and calisthenic endeavors,” says Derek Cook, a former personal trainer who teaches yoga.

8 Yoga Poses You Need to Know

1. CHILD'S POSE



This calming pose is a good default pause position. You can use child's pose to rest and refocus before continuing to your next pose. It gently stretches your lower back, hips, thighs, knees and ankles and relaxes your spine, shoulders and neck.

Do it: When you want to get a nice gentle stretch through your neck spine and hips.

Skip it: If you have knee injuries or ankle problems. Avoid also if you have high blood pressure or are pregnant.

Modify: You can rest your head on a cushion or block. You can place a rolled towel under your ankles if they are uncomfortable.

Be mindful: Focus on relaxing the muscles of the spine and lower back as you breathe.

2.DOWNWARD-FACING DOG



Downward-facing dog strengthens the arms, shoulders and back while stretching the hamstrings, calves and arches of your feet. It can also help relieve back pain.

Do it: To help relieve back pain.

Skip it: This pose is not recommended if you have carpal tunnel syndrome or other wrist problems, have high blood pressure or are in the late stages of pregnancy.

Modify: You can do the pose with your elbows on the ground, which takes the weight off your wrists. You can also use blocks under your hands, which may feel more comfortable.

Be mindful: Focus on distributing the weight evenly through your palms and lifting your hips up and back, away from your shoulders.

3. PLANK POSE



A commonly seen exercise, plank helps build strength in the core, shoulders, arms and legs.

Do it: Plank pose is good if you are looking to tone your abs and build strength in your upper body.

Skip it: Avoid plank pose if you suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome. It can be hard on your wrists. You might also skip it or modify if you have low back pain.

Modify: You can modify it by placing your knees on the floor.

Be mindful: As you do a plank, imagine the back of your neck and spine lengthening.

4. COBRA POSE



This back-bending pose can help strengthen the back muscles, increase spinal flexibility and stretches the chest, shoulders and abdomen.

Do it: This pose is great for strengthening the back.

Skip it: If you have arthritis in your spine or neck, a low-back injury or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Modify: Just lift up a few inches, and don't try to straighten your arms.

Be mindful: Try to keep your navel drawing up away from the floor as you hold this pose.

5. TREE POSE



Beyond helping improve your balance, it can also strengthen your core, ankles, calves, thighs and spine.

Do it: Great for working on your balance and posture.

Skip it: You may want to skip this pose if you have low blood pressure or any medical conditions that affect your balance.

Modify: Place one of your hands on a wall for support.

Be mindful: Focus on your breath in and out as you hold this pose.

6. TRIANGLE POSE



Triangle, which is a part of many yoga sequences helps build strength in the legs and stretches the hips, spine, chest, shoulders, groins, hamstrings and calves. It can also help increase mobility in the hips and neck.

Do it: This pose is great for building strength and endurance.

Skip it: Avoid this pose if you have a headache or low blood pressure.

Modify: If you have high blood pressure, turn your head to gaze downward in the final pose. If you have neck problems, don't turn your head to look upward; look straight ahead and keep both sides of the neck long.

Be mindful: Keep lifting your raised arm toward the ceiling. It helps keep the pose buoyant.

7. BRIDGE POSE



This is a back-bending pose that stretches the muscles of the chest, back and neck. It also builds strength in the back and hamstring muscles.

Do it: If you sit most of the day, this pose will help you open your upper chest.

Skip it: Avoid this pose if you have a neck injury.

Modify: Place a block between your thighs to help keep the legs and feet in proper alignment. Or you can place a block under your pelvis if your lower back is bothering you.

Be mindful: While holding this pose, try to keep your chest lifted and your sternum toward your chin.

8. CORPSE POSE



Like life, yoga classes typically end with this pose. It allows for a moment of relaxation, but some people find it difficult to stay still in this pose. However, the more you try this pose, the easier it is to sink into a relaxing, meditative state.

Do it: Always!

Skip it: If you don't want to have a moment's peace.

Modify: Place a blanket under your head, if that feels more comfortable. You can also roll up a blanket and place that under your knees, if your lower back is sensitive or bothering you.

Be mindful: Feel the weight of your body sinking into your mat one part at a time.

Yoga and Meditation

Before yoga was a popular physical exercise, it was, for thousands of years, mainly a meditation practice.

MINDFULNESS WITH YOGA

In a yoga class, as you learn to do yoga poses, you will be instructed to notice your breath and the way your body moves during the exercises. This is the foundation of a mind-body connection.

A well-balanced series of yoga exercises gives you the opportunity to scan your entire body, noting how you feel as you move through the poses. You may begin to realize, for example, that one side of your body feels different than the other during a stretch, or that it's easier to balance on your right leg, or that certain poses help ease tension in your neck.

This is how yoga turns physical exercises into tools to help students become more mindful and even learn to meditate.

Stephen Cope, who teaches yoga and mindfulness at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Massachusetts has written that learning to focus in this way can help us outside of yoga class, too. "As we train our attention, we'll begin to notice our postures throughout the day, not just on the yoga mat," Mr. Cope writes in his book "Yoga and the Quest for the True Self."

Learning to be aware of your posture at your desk or when you walk, for example, can be the first step to making improvements that will make you move more easily and feel better all the time.

THE BREATH

Breathing techniques are an essential part of yoga — not only do they help you to stay focused while practicing yoga, they can also help reduce stress and relax the nervous system and calm the mind.

Yoga breathing techniques also offer a "way into meditation," says Elena Brower, a yoga and meditation teacher and the author of "[Art of Attention](#)." Ms. Brower says that more people who have in recent years focused on the physical aspects of yoga are moving toward meditation, as they find

“they have an increasing need to have time to reflect, release and recalibrate.”

Here are a few types of breathing techniques that may be included in a yoga class:

Abdominal Breathing: Also called diaphragmatic or belly breathing, this is the most common breathing technique you’ll find in basic yoga. It helps foster healthy, efficient breathing in general.

Try it:

1. Inflate your abdomen as you inhale.
2. Exhale, trying to empty your abdomen of as much air as you can.

Ujjayi or “victorious” breath: This type of deep breathing allows you to slow and smooth the flow of breath. It is often used in flow classes to help students regulate their breathing as they move through the poses.

Try it:

1. Constrict the muscles in the back of your throat and breathe in and out with your mouth closed.
2. Some say this breathing technique sounds like Darth Vader; others say it sounds like the ocean. In any case, the sound should be audible to you only; your neighbor doesn’t necessarily need to hear it.

Interval or interrupted breathing: In this type of breathing, the student is instructed to pauses and hold the breath during the inhalation or exhalation, or both. It is a good way to begin to learn to control the breath, especially if you are looking to try more advance yoga breathing techniques.

Try it:

1. Inhale fully.
2. Release one-third of the breath.
3. Pause.
4. Release another third of the breath.
5. Pause.
6. Exhale the rest of the breath.
7. Repeat.

8. If you like, you can then do a couple rounds of interrupted breathing during exhalation.

Alternate nostril breathing: This technique is said to be effective in balancing the nervous system and is a good idea to try before meditation
Try it:

1. Hold one nostril closed and inhale through the open nostril.
2. Exhale through the open nostril.
3. Switch your hands and block the open nostril, releasing the closed nostril.
4. Inhale through the open nostril and exhale.
5. Repeat several times.

NO SOCKS, NO SHOES, NO PROBLEM

Yoga is generally practiced in bare feet on a mat. Socks are slippery, which is why wearing them is not recommended. If you really want to wear socks, look for sports socks that have rubber grips on the soles.

YOGA MATS

Most yoga studios and gyms offer mats, but many yoga students prefer to buy a mat, for hygiene and because mats differ in material, density and stickiness. You may find you develop a strong preference for a certain type of mat.

Choose a mat that prevents you from slipping and sliding, as that will give you a stable base for transitioning from one pose to the next. Clean your mat regularly with antibacterial wipes. If you plan to rent mats at your studio or gym, it would be a good idea to carry around a small packet of antibacterial wipes to clean your rental mat.

If you are looking to buy your own yoga mat, The Wirecutter, a website owned by The New York Times Company, [has done a complete review of your options.](#)

CLOTHES

Comfortable clothing is recommended. Any workout clothes would generally work well for a yoga class. However, clothing that is too loose-fitting may get in the way if you progress into headstand and handstand poses.

WHAT CLASS IS RIGHT FOR ME?

There are many styles of yoga classes taught today. Some are very physically challenging and will leave you sweating; others are gentle and restorative. Some teachers play music in class; others don't. Some classes include references to yoga philosophy and spirituality; others don't.

Here are a few types of classes your yoga studio or gym may offer:

Hatha: Most yoga styles being taught in America today are a form of hatha yoga, which is a general term that refers to the physical part of yoga, rather than yoga philosophy or meditation. A Hatha yoga class is likely to be a combination of poses and breathing exercises, but it's hard to know whether it will be challenging or gentle. Check with the school or the teacher to find more about the level of classes that are described only as Hatha yoga.

Ashtanga Yoga: This is a challenging style of yoga that is centered around a progressive series of yoga sequences that, traditionally, students practice on their own under the guidance of a teacher. If you think that yoga is not a workout, you haven't tried an Ashtanga class. Classes include advanced poses such as arm balances and inversions including headstands and shoulder stands. Beginner students are strongly advised to study with an experienced teacher. Ashtanga classes will also often include teachings in yoga philosophy.

Power Yoga: As its name suggests, power yoga is a challenging style of yoga aimed at strength-building. These classes will include advanced poses and inversions like headstands and handstands that require a lot of strength.

Vinyasa or Flow: These classes usually consist of a fairly energetic flowing sequence of yoga poses that will include — depending on the level — advanced poses, such as arm balances, headstands, shoulder stands and handstands. Many vinyasa classes have musical accompaniment of the teacher's choosing.

Iyengar: Love learning about how your muscles and joints work together? This is the yoga for you. Iyengar yoga focuses on the precision of your yoga poses. Iyengar classes are known for their use of props, including blankets, blocks, straps and bolsters, to help students do poses that they wouldn't be able to do otherwise. Classes can also include ropes that are

anchored to the walls to do inversions and other poses. They also tend to include breathing exercises and references to yoga philosophy.

Bikram or Hot Yoga: Like the heat? Bikram yoga is a set series of 26 poses performed in a room heated to 105 degrees, which is said to allow for deeper stretching and provide for a better cardiovascular workout. Unlike most yoga classes, Bikram classes are always done in rooms with mirrors. Hot yoga refers to any yoga class that is done in a heated room — generally from 80 to 100 degrees.

Restorative Yoga: If you are looking for a little more relaxation from your yoga class, restorative yoga is for you. This yoga style usually involves a few restful poses that are held for long periods of time. Restorative poses include light twists, seated forward folds and gentle back-bends, usually done with the assistance of many props, including blankets, blocks and bolsters.

Yin Yoga: Looking for a new kind of stretching experience? Yin yoga is aimed at stretching the connective tissue around the pelvis, sacrum, spine and knees to promote flexibility. Poses are held for a longer amount of time in yin yoga classes, generally from three to five minutes. It is a quiet style of yoga, and will quickly show you how good you are at sitting still.

Note: It's a good idea to try several yoga classes. **How much you enjoy any class will come down to how much you like the teacher, not how it's labeled.**

CLASS ETIQUETTE

Yoga students are expected to be on time to class and respectful of one another. Crowded classes can mean that students will be aligned mat-to-mat, so don't assume that you will have a lot of room around you for personal belongings. Most yoga classrooms have shelves for your valuables, drinks and other personal items. Remember to turn your cellphone off before class.

For Bikram or hot yoga classes, bring a towel. You are going to sweat, and it will help prevent slipping.

Classes usually begin with a brief introduction by the teacher that may include a focus or theme for the day, such as backbends or particular poses, and then the teacher often will instruct the class to chant the word

“Om” together. (Om is a Sanskrit term that connotes the connectivity of all things in the universe.)

To “Om” or not to “Om”? There is no obligation to chant, but you should at least remain quiet during that time.

Some breathing techniques taught in yoga classes are meant to be loud and others are not. Students should take cues from the teacher.

If you have to leave early, try to tell the teacher ahead of time, and, if you can, position yourself near the back of the room and leave before the relaxation period at the end of class.

A note to the over-achiever: Trying too hard often leads to injury. Being aware of your physical limitations and when you need to modify a pose will be more beneficial to your body than reaching to be the most flexible or strongest in the class.

STILL WANT MORE?

[Yoga Journal](#), started in 1975 by a group of yoga teachers from California, is one of the most comprehensive online yoga sites available. (The company also publishes a monthly print magazine.) The online site has detailed information on practicing yoga, including a guide to poses and a tool to help you put yoga poses together into a sequence or class, as well as lots of information on meditation and wellness.

NFL(Carolina Panthers) Mike Adams



NBA (Cleveland Cavaliers) LeBron James



(Tennis) Novak Djokovic



NBA (Golden State Warriors) Andre Iguodala



NBA (Dallas Mavericks) Dirk Nowitzki (left)

