



Yoga: Great for Mind and Body

Thinking about signing up for a yoga class? Millions of Americans are now enjoying the physical and mental benefits of this 2,000-year-old exercise program. The word “yoga” is derived from the Sanscrit term for “union” or “joining,” and that’s just what yoga aims to do—raise awareness of the connection between your body and mind through a series of stretches, positions and breathing exercises.

There are lots of different kinds of yoga, with some forms emphasizing meditation and others focusing on increasing flexibility, so ask a yoga teacher which is right for you. Pregnant women, or anyone with a particular health concern, should speak to a doctor before signing up and inform the yoga instructor about special conditions before class begins.

Who should take yoga?

One of the great things about yoga is that almost anyone can do it, including children. Whether you’re in shape or out of shape, old or young, a stay-at-home-mom or a globe-trotting executive, yoga is an excellent way to strengthen your muscles *and* your mind. Yoga is a nonaerobic form of exercise (you won’t be jumping up and down for half an hour), but it still promotes flexibility, strength and relaxation.

What are the physical benefits?

Yoga is an exercise program that’s not strenuous but still has substantial health benefits. Though it can’t cure any condition, yoga may help lower blood pressure, reduce cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of stress-related diseases such as heart attack, ulcers and insomnia. In 1998, the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that yoga helped increase strength and reduce pain for those suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome. The Mayo Clinic recommends yoga for patients who have irritable bowel syndrome, restless leg syndrome, pulmonary hypertension and migraines.

What are the mental benefits?

Yoga increases mental, as well as physical, flexibility. Most classes include a series of deep-breathing exercises, often concluding with participants lying on the floor in a state of total relaxation. Visualization techniques are also used to improve the balance between mind and body. Since feeling relaxed and peaceful is a primary goal, yoga can dramatically decrease stress and anxiety, improve memory and concentration, and even alleviate some symptoms of depression. With a clear mind in a flexible body, you may find that you do everything a little bit better!

Where do I sign up?

Most health clubs offer regular yoga classes, as do local YMCAs and YWCAs, community centers and universities. Ask about your instructor’s qualifications, since yoga teachers aren’t medical professionals and aren’t licensed.

Yoga’s focus on the connection between your mind and body means that both are strengthened. A weekly yoga class may be the perfect “treat” if you’ve got a busy schedule, so put aside some time for yourself and make that self even healthier!

Sources: Wholehealth MD, www.wholehealthmd.com; *Journal of the American Medical Association*, www.jama.ama-assn.org; *Yoga Journal*, www.yogajournal.com

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