

Yoga is exercise and a way of life – and it's relatively easy to do

by R.J. Ignelzi

Is your brain telling you it's time to get moving, but your body is a little slow to follow? After months (or longer) of sofa nesting, it's important to find the right exercise to get you going and keep you going.

YOGA FOR LIFE - Yoga instructor Kirsten Miller, who teaches at Yoga Fusion and the University of California San Diego, performs an extended side angle pose. CNS Photo by Charlie Neuman. Yoga may be just the fitness ticket. It's gentle on the joints and kind to the mind, and after you've gotten the basics down, it can be practiced almost anywhere at no cost.

A 5,000-year-old Hindu-based tradition, yoga exercises are designed to unite physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Literally translated, yoga means "union."

More than 16 million Americans are thought to practice some form of yoga, says Yoga Alliance, a national registry of yoga instructors. And for many yoga devotees, yoga is more than exercise. It's a way of life. But belief in the philosophical aspects of yoga isn't required for participation.

More than a dozen styles of yoga are practiced, but most include an emphasis on concentration, breathing, relaxation and moving the body into poses called asanas.

HEALTH AND FITNESS BENEFITS

Yoga movements can increase strength, flexibility, balance, circulation and endurance. The breathing exercises that are often a part of yoga can decrease blood pressure and lower the level of stress hormones.

Holding postures may help build muscle tone, which enhances physical well-being and protects delicate joints against injury. Because yoga exercises are usually practiced slowly, without pushing or jerking the body, there's little risk of strain or injury.

CALORIES BURNED

According to an American Council on Exercise (ACE) study released this year, a 140-pound person burns about 144 calories practicing Hatha yoga for 50 minutes and 237 calories doing power yoga in the same time.

WHO IS YOGA GOOD FOR?

Almost everyone. Especially beneficial for someone who wants to reduce stress or has joint and muscle problems that make high-impact exercise difficult. It's great for older adults who may need to improve their balance and range of movement to help avoid falls.

It may help people with certain chronic conditions, such as anxiety, high blood pressure, diabetes and arthritis.

WHO IS YOGA NOT GOOD FOR?

Yoga's not for someone looking for a cardio workout. According to the ACE study, Hatha yoga offers no substantial aerobic benefit and even power yoga is only a mild aerobic workout.

It's probably not a good time to start yoga if you're pregnant and have never practiced yoga before. If you have a disc problems, glaucoma, high blood pressure and some other health conditions, you may need to modify certain poses.

HOW TO START

Take a beginner's yoga class one to three times a week to start. Aim to take a class more often as you progress. Most gyms, including YMCAs and recreation centers, offer yoga classes, and there are yoga studios throughout the country. Practice yoga at home between classes.

There are several styles of yoga. Try different ones to determine which suits you best. Although there are a variety of yoga DVDs and books available, it's important to learn the basics - proper alignment, postures and form - from an instructor.

HOW TO PROGRESS AND ADD CHALLENGE

Try more advanced poses and classes after you become familiar and comfortable with yoga. As you learn and refine new poses, you'll find that each time you practice, you can reach a little farther.

Some yoga experts advise trying a different style of yoga occasionally for the mental stimulation of something different.

If you decide to practice at home after learning the basics in a class, be sure to attend a class periodically to get appropriate feedback and avoid perpetuating ineffective postures or breathing techniques.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A YOGA INSTRUCTOR

The instructor should be certified. There are several types of certification. The organization Yoga Alliance maintains a national registry of certified yoga teachers who meet the organization's standards at www.yogaalliance.com. Many instructors are ACE-certified, and some are trained and certified in India.

In addition to teaching experience, a yoga instructor should have verbal skills to guide students, demonstration skills to show the postures and the ability to physically align students.

EQUIPMENT AND CLOTHING

Although most yoga studios provide yoga mats, you may want to get your own (\$15 to \$25). It should be soft but easy to roll up and carry. The mat should be fairly thin so it doesn't hinder postures that require balance, and it should have a slight texture for a better toe grip.

Yoga props, including blocks, bands or straps, are used to modify some poses. Most studios furnish those. You'll need to purchase them if practicing at home (\$7 to \$15 at stores and from online catalogs).

Yoga apparel can be form- or loose-fitting comfortable pants and a tank top. Some instructors prefer to see students' knees to make sure they're posing correctly. Billowy shorts and tops or low-rider pants may be too revealing, especially in some inverted postures. No shoes or socks.

TIPS TO AVOID INJURY

The most common injuries involve overstretching the neck, shoulders, spine, legs and knees. To avoid those, listen to your body. If you experience pain or exhaustion while doing yoga, stop and take break. Keep hydrated if doing Bikram (hot) yoga.

Warm up thoroughly before a yoga session because cold muscles, tendons and ligaments are vulnerable to injuries.

Know your limits. Do not try postures beyond your experience or comfort level. Inform your instructor of any health conditions or physical limitations, so you can modify postures using props enabling you to practice positions without straining your body.

BEGINNER DO'S AND DON'TS

Do tell the teacher if this is your first class.

Do listen to your body; don't push too much or too little.

Do find an instructor who inspires you to progress.

Do try different styles of yoga to find one that suits you.

Do arrive at yoga class clean, showered, wearing clean workout clothes.

Don't have a big meal right before class. Don't eat at least 90 minutes before class.

Don't try to compete with other students. Go at your own pace.

Don't wear strong perfumes, which can irritate others in class.

- - -

Contributing yoga experts:

Beth Shaw, an American Council on Exercise (ACE) faculty member from Torrance, Calif., has been teaching yoga for more than 14 years. She owns Yoga Fit, the largest yoga instructor training school in North America.

Eddy Marks, an instructor of yoga for 26 years, was trained in India and owns the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Center of San Diego.

Copley News Service.

Yoga is exercise and a way of life and it's relatively easy to do by R.J. Ignelzi