

Benefits of Yoga

The practice of yoga has been around for over 5,000 years but it wasn't until the 1960s that it became widely popular in the United States. Yoga has gained acceptance and respect in our culture, and is used to improve well-being and decrease stress. Many physicians now recommend yoga to patients who are at risk for heart disease, as well as for those with back pain, arthritis, depression, and other chronic conditions (American Yoga Association [AYA], 2006). A West Virginia University study funded by the National Institutes of Health showed that people with chronic lower-back problems who do yoga also do better at overcoming pain and depression than people treated conventionally for back pain (MedicalNews Today, 2009). Currently, close to 11 million Americans are enjoying its health benefits (Hoffman, 2008).

The system of yoga is based on three main structures: exercise, breathing, and meditation. Yoga exercises are designed to increase efficiency and total health of the body (AYA, 2006). Regular daily practice of all three structures can produce a clear, bright mind and a strong, capable body (AYA, 2006).

There are over a hundred different schools of yoga. Hatha yoga is what most people associate with yoga practice; it focuses on breathing and body movements. Bikram is done in a hot room that replicates the temperature of yoga's birthplace in India. Another type is Ashtanga, or power yoga, which focuses on developing strength and stamina. This type is preferred by athletes and is suitable for anyone in reasonable

physical condition. Kundalini is a type that incorporates chanting, meditations, and visualizations. It focuses on healing and “purifying” the mind, body, and emotion (Yoga Online, 2009).

Some of the benefits yoga offers include: flexibility, strength, posture, and deepened breathing. People are never too old to improve flexibility, and yoga includes poses called “asanas” that work by safely stretching the muscles. This releases the lactic acid that builds up with muscle use and causes stiffness, tension, pain, and fatigue (Hoffman, 2008). Some of the more vigorous styles of yoga, which focuses on less movement and more precise alignment in poses, can provide strength and endurance benefits (Hoffman, 2008). With increased flexibility and strength comes better posture. Yoga also increases body awareness. This heightened awareness allows a person to know more quickly when they are slouching so that posture can be adjusted (Hoffman, 2008). Lung capacity is also improved due to the deep, mindful breathing that is associated with yoga. This can improve sports performance and endurance (Hoffman, 2008).

If you are interested in trying yoga or hoping to achieve one of the many health benefits, visit <http://www.jmu.edu/recreation/Programs/GroupFitness/index.html> to view and sign up for available yoga classes. There are a variety of classes offered at different times, so check it out to see which classes will fit into your schedule.

Works Cited

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