

IS YOGA RIGHT FOR YOU?

Considering it's thousands of years old, it might seem silly to say that yoga has come a long way in recent years. But as mind/body exercise continues to take hold of the fitness industry, the practice of yoga has moved from the alternative to the mainstream.

Today's hectic lifestyle has left many people wondering how to manage the stress that comes along with it. While regular aerobic exercise and strength training can help, they aren't the complete answer. Some experts and practitioners believe that yoga is the piece you need to complete the puzzle of maintaining fitness in both the body and mind.

A Trend Worth Following

Now, before you start conjuring up images of zoned-out new-agers in pretzel-like positions chanting mantras, consider this: Yoga is an ancient practice that can help you deal with the stress of modern life. And more and more people, stressed out or not, are discovering the benefits of yoga.

In fact, it has been reported that more than 11 million Americans are now practicing some form of yoga.

Yoga, which means to yoke or unite, is the practice of uniting all aspects of a person—body, mind and spirit—through physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation. Flexibility, strength and muscle tone improve quickly as the mind and body work together in harmony and unison.

Choose Your Yoga

There are several different branches of yoga,

each with its own unique focus. Hatha yoga, the most widely practiced form, emphasizes concentration and consists of gentle stretching and strengthening exercises.

Because prana, or life force, is thought to originate in the breath, pranayama yoga uses breathing exercises and breath control to enhance vitality and energy. Mantra yoga uses the concentrated repetition of a word or phrase to aid in the control of the mind.

A Time to Relax

For some, yoga is a primary means of relaxation, something that is often difficult to achieve in the high-stress, high-speed modern world. Regardless of which type you choose, yoga is an excellent way to stretch and strengthen the body, focus the mind and relax the spirit. In fact, most modern stress-reduction techniques are based on the principles of yoga.

Available research indicates that stress-related diseases respond favorably to this type of approach. Hypertension, insulin resistance, pain, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression all are beneficially affected by regular participation in mindful exercise such as yoga.

Easing Into It

The best way to get started in yoga is to find a class that appeals to you. Find out where yoga

classes are being held in your area and stop by to see what you think. There are many different approaches to yoga—some focus on breathing, others focus on holding specific postures—and it's important to find the one that appeals to you the most.

An Intense Yoga Workout

For a more intense yoga workout, choose ashtanga, or power yoga. This type involves a series of very intense yoga postures done in succession. This class, which is a vigorous workout, can help develop strength as well as flexibility.

Improve Overall Health and Performance

Yoga is a great way not only to relax, but also to improve your performance in other activities. Once you have learned a few yoga moves and breathing techniques, they can easily be integrated into your regular fitness routine.

So don't let any preconceived notions of yoga keep you from enjoying the benefits of this dynamic mind/body exercise.

Additional Resources

WebMD Video—Yoga Pilates Studies: www.webmd.com/video/yoga-pilates-studies

YogaFit by Beth Shaw www.acefitness.org/acestore/p-724-yogafit-by-beth-shaw-2nd-ed.aspx

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org/GetFit and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts!™



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