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Yoga 101

It seems like everyone's doing it, but what are the benefits and is it right for you? Here are the basics of yoga to help you decide

By Ylva Van Buren

I started looking for something more from exercise when I began to lose direction – my inner direction that is – when I was running. Sure, running is peaceful in that it's just me and my feet making time. And yes, there is that satisfying hum my body makes when it's moving. And stress, oh yes, I've sweated through lots of that on my runs.

But it's different when your body is quiet, when the roar of your pounding heart is not in your ears, when there's absolute calmness in a stretch and tremendous power from deep down inside you, behind a breath. It's different when at the end of a session, you are both invigorated and at peace.

That's what yoga can offer: a quieting blanket, a sense of empowerment, a deeper place. And that's exactly what an increasing number of women like me are looking for. Yoga, which originated in India over 5000 years ago, has come of age in this new millennium, providing a balance of physical and mind fitness and if you're interested, a sense of spirituality as well.

Physically

Apart from its mindfulness, yoga is also good physical exercise. Dr. Les Davidson, a chiropractor in Calgary, applauds yoga especially for its full range-of-motion stretching, which promotes flexibility. "When you do a motion such as bending forward toward your toes," explains Dr. Davidson, "there are about 24 segments that contribute to that overall motion. Doing that movement in a yoga class takes you through all of those segments." Flexibility helps to prevent injuries and keeps muscles supple and youthful. A class generally consists of warm-up stretches, physical poses (called asanas) and other movements, that stretch and strengthen muscles. Poses have names like Downward Facing Dog, the Cobra and the Warrior and are performed in a particular sequence. While yoga isn't an aerobic activity, you'll use your muscles a lot and build endurance because many of the poses are held for short periods of time. Shirley Johannesen, president of Stretch-Awareness, in Calgary, and a yoga teacher for 31 years, says yoga also keeps a body younger longer. It keeps joints mobile, improves circulation, stimulates internal organs in the body and helps with digestion.

Mentally and Spiritually

Yoga is also an opportunity to get in touch with yourself, says Johannesen. "If you're doing an exercise, you can actually feel the muscles, feel your body and skin, and then watch how you react to that feeling." Body awareness is key, and breathing deeply and in rhythm with movements is the link between mind and body.

Robert Hay, owner of the Rama Lotus Yoga Centre in Ottawa, explains that Yogic breathing also helps you to release stress. "When we're feeling anxious, our breath becomes very shallow. When we are calm and relaxed, it is deeper and more rhythmic," says Hay, who teaches an energizing style of yoga called kundalini. "Once we've learned breath control, we just choose to make the breath longer and deeper when we get really stressed. A deep breath can disable that stress response because you can't be stressed out and breathing long and deep at the same time."

Find the Right Class

The type of yoga you practice depends on your particular needs and goals. Here are some things to keep in mind when

you are looking for the right class for you:

- If you have special health concerns you should talk to your doctor before you sign up for a class.
- Shop around to find a class. Yoga is offered in the workplace, through community centres, at most health clubs and yoga centres. If you prefer working out at home, there are lots of yoga videotapes and books. The Yoga Studio in Toronto suggests starting with the video Kripalu Yoga Gentle, \$30 or the book Yoga: Moving into Stillness by Eric Schiffman (Pocket Books, 1996), \$23.50.
- Talk to the teacher. Find out about her training and philosophy and take one of her classes. Are postures demonstrated and explained well? Are modified versions of difficult postures provided? Are you being pushed past your limit? According to Hay, the perfect yoga class provides three levels of challenge: easy movements that feel good to do; movements that are hard and you do your best to do them; and the third level, movements that are even harder to do "but if you really bring your spirit up or challenge yourself, then you can do them by overcoming self limitations."

Yoga is about easing your body and mind into a place that feels good, and pushing only when it feels okay. And once you have opened yourself to the physical and mental challenges of yoga, you'll never know what you'll find.

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