

Yoga for Your Health: Now Is the Next Best Time to Start!

By Drew Perry

Partner/Teacher at Yoga North

Yoga can help improve your health, regardless of your present state of health, fitness or flexibility. Yes, that includes you, too.

We've all seen pictures of lithe, flexible and mostly younger bodies doing exotic yoga poses in the magazines and on billboards. We might naturally think, "That's OK for them, but it's not for me. Not at my age. Not for stiff people like me."

Consider that your first reaction might not be accurate. There are many kinds of yoga available, and there is likely a method and class that would be accessible to you, regardless of where you're starting from.

Ancient yoga practitioners from India might not recognize what the Western world calls yoga today. Yoga in the West has emphasized the workout and exercise aspects of this tradition. But originally yoga was defined as a means to "still the fluctuations of the mind." Even in ancient India, people had multiple conflicting and contrary thoughts buzzing around in their heads. We can identify with that feeling in our 21st century lives, given our 24-hour news channels, omnipresent social media, financial and safety issues, general and specific health concerns, perhaps an aging parent to care for ... you can fill in your own blanks here.

What if there was a way to calm that busy mind? A calmer mind would help reduce tension and anxiety – two big contributors to both mental and physical illness. How can yoga help?

On just the physical level, yoga poses – that is, the body shapes that you learn to create and hold – help the body become stronger and healthier. Poses can help to open up tight joints and strengthen weak muscles so the body can cope better with everyday activities. You will likely become more aware of places of chronic tightness and then learn to consciously relax those spots – like those overworked shoulders and that clenched jaw.

Gradually, you can learn to sustain simple yoga poses for longer periods of time. These longer holds help you to build up your powers of balance, focus and concentration, as well as increase your muscle and bone strength.

When you make one change in your exercise routine, there's a ripple effect. For example, a change to the outer body can teach the inner person a thing or two. After doing the poses for a while we may feel more confident; we may move a little more freely. A chance slip on the ice doesn't have to be a constant fear when you venture out in the winter.

Our culture has learned to integrate other systems of health care and treatment into the mainstream. It wasn't too many years ago that acupuncture was rarely used. Now, it's eagerly sought out as one of a range of remedies to treat health issues, along with mainstream medicine and holistic practices.

Similarly, over hundreds of years, yoga practitioners developed specific yoga poses and sequences that can work in a therapeutic way. Some poses can rebalance the body when it's become chronically stiff in one area, throwing posture and gait out of alignment. Certain poses and sequences of poses can address lower back issues, or hip and knee pain.

Anecdotal stories of the beneficial effects of yoga are common among yoga students. Roger came to the men's class for 3 weeks, and reports that his back doesn't hurt him anymore; Elise came to the seniors class regularly, and says that she feels more confident walking on icy sidewalks now; women in the special class for those in cancer treatment or recovery report a greater sense of well-being and less worry; and Simon suffered from post-concussion issues but found that he felt better after his first restorative yoga class than he'd felt in months.

Universities and health care professionals have become more interested in testing the effectiveness of alternative treatments, including yoga as a therapy. Scientific studies have documented improvements for those who follow a yoga routine regularly, compared to those who engage in simple exercise. A recent *Washington Post* article, for example, reported that senior women who took a regular Iyengar yoga class (i.e. a particular method of teaching and practicing) had fewer falls – reducing one of the risks of broken bones and hospital stays.

A final word of caution: not all yoga is the same. Some types emphasize fast-paced flowing sequences, which may be fine for the young and healthy. It may not be suitable for the older, less active or overweight person. Other types are quiet and meditative. The Iyengar Yoga we teach at Yoga North is more deliberate and attentive to details and accuracy, with progressive levels of learning. Iyengar Yoga supports health and well-being at any age and through all stages of life.

If you're starting yoga for the first time, it's important that you to inquire about the method, what training the teacher has, and whether it's appropriate for your current state of health and fitness. If you're in doubt, you can talk it over with your health care professional.

As an old friend used to tell me, now is the next best time to start.