

## Is Yoga Right for Me?

Despite being around for thousands of years, yoga has recently become one of the trendiest forms of exercise. A survey from the Sports and Fitness Industry Association found that 24 million American adults practiced yoga in 2013 and that number seems to continue to grow. That leads many to wonder what all the hype is about. It turns out that there are many benefits of yoga.

We have known for quite some time the benefits of physical exercise for both our bodies and our minds. Scientific studies have similarly associated yoga with some of these benefits. Yoga has been found to decrease psychological symptoms related to anxiety and depression in older adults. In healthy older adults, yoga was found to increase muscle tone and improve respiration. Not only that, but many yoga practitioners report increased strength, flexibility and overall fitness. In addition, yoga has been linked with reduced hypertension, increased physical functioning following a stroke, reduced insomnia and reduced disability related to chronic back pain. Several studies have also found that following a yoga program can lead to improvement on cognitive tasks. One study even found that this gain in cognitive performance was more than we see with other types of physical exercise such as stretching and strengthening. Beyond these specific health benefits, many yoga practitioners report feeling an improved quality of life that they associate specifically with their practice.

So, what makes yoga different than other forms of exercise? Yoga is considered a mind-body exercise. It typically involves physical postures, conscious breathing, and some form of meditation or mindfulness. Some yoga practices are more physical than others, requiring more movement and flowing from posture to posture whereas other focus more on the meditative component. It is considered a low-impact workout and therefore will not be too hard on joints. Also, almost all yoga postures and poses have modifications. In fact, chair yoga programs have been designed for those who are unable to get completely onto the floor. An important rule-of-thumb with yoga is to listen to your body – if something feels uncomfortable or painful, don't do it! Instead, try modifying the posture to something you can comfortably do.

If you are thinking about starting a yoga program, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) suggests you consider the following. First, despite the many health benefits of yoga, you should not use yoga to replace other forms of medicine or postpone appointments to see if you will benefit from yoga alone. Yoga can be a great addition to a healthy lifestyle, but is not the only component of it. Second, think about what type of yoga might work for you and your body. While modifications may be made in any class, if standing for more than a few moments becomes painful for you, perhaps look to try a chair yoga class first. Similarly, if you hate hot temperatures, avoid Bikram or hot yoga classes. Third, try to find a class taught by a certified yoga teacher to begin. This will allow you to become more familiar with the poses and how they are supposed to feel because the yoga instructor can demonstrate correct postures throughout the class if needed. As you become more comfortable, there are many yoga programs available on DVD and Blu-ray to try. Last, it is always wise to consult with your physician before you start any exercise program. Namaste new yogis!

Jessica Saurman, M.A., is a psychology doctoral student training at the UCCS Aging Center. For more information, contact her at [jsaurman@uccs.edu](mailto:jsaurman@uccs.edu) or call the Aging Center at 719-255-8002.

