

IT'S ALL GOOD



Mira Khreino lists 30 yoga benefits, to name but a few...

1. Improves Flexibility

Flexing, extending, and rotating the spine gives more mobility and agility to the body. With persistent practice there is a gradual loosening of muscles and areas of restriction. Aches and pains decrease, hips and shoulders move more liberally, and joint stability improves (especially in the knee).

2. Treats Poor Posture

Poor posture can cause back, neck, and joint pain. When upright (standing or seated), our spine needs to carry the head, equivalent to a bowling ball in size and weight. If that weight is too far forward, back, or to the side, then muscles will be strained to carry the load, resulting in pain. The lower spine overcompensates for misalignment further up, the natural curves are affected and vertebral health impacted. Bad habits can have us roll the shoulders inwards (kyphosis- an overpronunciation of the thoracic curve), thrust the pelvis too far forward (sway back- over stretching of hip flexors), and exaggerate the arch in the lower back (lordosis- an overextension of the lumbar spine). These postural conditions can all be helped by yoga.

3. Strengthens Muscles

Muscles become stronger and help support a more functional and integrated body. The body therefore works better as a whole. Strong yet lean muscles give the body balance and stability.

4. Improves Cartilage And Joint Health

Cartilage deteriorates with wear and tear. This collagenous tissue needs fresh nutrients in order to retain its spongy consistency. Neglected joints which are not used nor moved, or used incorrectly, can wear out exposing the underlying bone. This greatly affects joint health. Yoga can greatly help prevent or at least postpone degenerative arthritis and other joint problems by healthily mobilizing the joints in their range of movement.

5. Increases Circulation

Yoga increases overall blood flow throughout the body; therefore, cells function better due to this increase in circulation. Yoga increases hemoglobin and red blood cells, which carry oxygen to the tissues. Often practitioners who once suffered from cold hands and feet feel less affected after their circulation improves due to yoga. Twisting poses wring out venous blood from the internal organs and releasing a twist encourages fresh blood, oxygen, and nutrients to flood in, nourishing the organs and leading to it functioning more effectively.

Inversions (shoulderstand and headstand) encourage blood flow to the brain, helping memory and concentration. Inversions also encourage "used" blood from the legs and pelvis to flow back to the heart where it can then be pumped into the lungs to be re-oxygenated. This can help with kidney problems and swelling in the legs.



6. Protects The Spine

The backbends, forwards bends, and twists in yoga help keep spinal discs supple. If the quality of the discs, the shock absorbers between the vertebral bones, is impaired, then they can herniate and compress radiating nerves causing pain and limiting movement.

7. Helps Bone Density And Strengthens Bone

Weight-bearing exercises in yoga strengthen bone by improving bone density. This is imperative in preventing osteoporosis. Poses that help you lift your weight, such as upward facing dog and downward facing improve arm bone strength. The joints in the arm and hand are the most common areas affected by osteoporosis.

8. Stimulates Lymphatic Drainage

Yoga can greatly improve lymphatic drainage (lymph is a viscous fluid rich in immune cells) and boost immunity. The contraction and stretching and the going into and coming out of yoga poses helps with this drainage.

9. Relieves Stress

Yoga is known for its stress-relieving quality. The hormone, cortisol is usually produced as a response to crisis and stress. Physiologically, yoga lowers cortisol levels by regulating the hormonal secretion from the adrenal glands. Having chronic high levels of cortisol in the system can compromise immune function and create permanent changes in the brain, which are linked to depression, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, and insulin resistance.

High cortisol levels (high stress) leads to “food-seeking behavior,” compulsive eating when stressed, angry, or upset. The body takes those extra calories and distributes them as fat in the abdominal region. Fatty deposits around the midsection and internal organs are particularly worrying, and are associated with greater risk of diabetes and heart attack.

10. A Natural Mood Alleviator

Yoga practitioners who have suffered from depression report its uplifting effect on mood. Studies show practitioners had a significant increase in serotonin levels (a neurotransmitter strongly associated with mood) and a decrease in the levels of cortisol and monoamine oxidase (an enzyme that breaks down neurotransmitters). Moreover, yoga has been linked to a happier outlook and healthier attitude towards life's adversities.



11. Benefits The Heart And Lowers Blood Pressure

Some types of yoga get the heart in the aerobic range, which strengthens the left ventricle (the chamber which pumps blood around the body). This lowers resting heart rate and blood pressure, decreasing the risk of heart attack. Improvement in cardiovascular conditioning, a lower resting heart rate, an increase in endurance, and better use of oxygen (aerobic energetic systems) in the body all take pressure off the heart. Studies have found such marked effects on blood pressure in *savasana* (the final relaxation in the yoga practice). People with hypertension had as much as a 26-point drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) and a 15-point drop in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number).

12. Encourages A Healthier Lifestyle

Yoga helps to improve general lifestyle. Feeling and looking healthier and stronger is incentive to do more for one's health. Yoga can inspire people to become more conscious with the way they treat their bodies including their exercise regime in addition to eating, smoking, and drinking habits.

13. Lowers Blood Sugar Levels

Yoga has been found to help lower blood sugar levels in people with diabetes by lowering cortisol and adrenaline levels, encouraging weight loss, and improving sensitivity to the effects of insulin. Yoga lowers blood sugar and LDL ("bad") cholesterol and boosts HDL ("good") cholesterol.

14. Disciplines The Mind

Yoga disciplines the mind to focus on the present, becoming less distracted by thoughts or external stimuli. An increase in the ability to focus and apply the mind has a beneficial effect on coordination, reaction time, memory, and problem solving. *Asana*, *pranayama*, and meditation train the mind to focus its attention on one single point or aspect, in most practice this is the breath. Studies have shown that yogic practices such as these can help your brain work better.

15. Helps Relaxation

Conscious relaxation is a big aspect of yoga. It reverses the fight-or-flight stress reaction by activating the parasympathetic nervous system which is soothing, calming, and restorative. It slows down the heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing speed. It encourages the relaxation response.



16. Expands Lung Capacity

The various breathing techniques in yoga improve lung capacity as more air volume can travel into the lungs. As lung function improves, the greater volume increases oxygen saturation in the blood. The cells in the body are therefore receiving a richer and more nourishing supply of blood. Improved lung function also leads to a lower breathing rate, as the body requires fewer breaths for the same volume of air. This impacts both heart rate and blood pressure – both are lowered due to more efficient use of the lungs.

17. Improves Coordination

Our proprioceptors are receptors that coordinate us in time and space. They help us sense the location of the body and the angles of our joints. People with bad posture or dysfunctional movement patterns usually have poor proprioception. This has been linked to knee problems and back pain. People who work on improving their proprioceptors through balance exercises in yoga have fewer falls and better coordination, and feel sturdier and more balanced when they move.

18. Makes Us Recognize Areas Of Tension

As one becomes more experienced in the practice, one starts to recognize where one holds unconscious tension (e.g the jaw, the shoulders, the forehead), becomes more conscious of unconscious body patterns, and can work to release areas of tension in day to day life.

19. Improves Quality Of Sleep

Yoga can help sleep by two means. First, it decreases sympathetic nervous system activity (fight-or-flight) and increases our relaxation response. Second, it decreases sensory stimulation to the brain. In daily life, our senses are constantly being stimulated. Of course, the brain has to constantly process this sensory information; therefore, the brain is hyper-active. Yoga gives the brain a little respite from this incessant overload. The mind becomes quieter and calmer. Sleep therefore improves.

20. Treats Digestive Issues

Yoga's stress-relieving effects can help in treating digestive issues such as irritable bowel syndrome and ulcers, which are exacerbated by stress. Yoga can also ease conditions such as constipation. The movements in yoga help waste products travel through the bowel more efficiently (twisting poses are especially effective at stimulating the colon).



21. Improves Low Self-Esteem

Very often people suffering from low self-esteem deal with self-deprecating thoughts by doing things which are detrimental to their health. In such situations behaviors such as taking drugs, overeating, over-working, and promiscuity are common. Practicing yoga is a healthy alternative. It improves confidence, is empowering, and increases self-worth. If one practices regularly with the intention of self-examination and betterment one will get to know and understand oneself better. Feelings of acceptance, gratitude, empathy, and forgiveness, as well as a connection to other people and a sense of being part of a larger whole are very prominent among spiritual practitioners.

22. Steadies The Mind

Yoga limits the fluctuations of the mind, with practitioners often reporting feeling less reactive and emotionally volatile. Yoga allows us to reframe our negative experiences, so the relationship we have with emotions such as anger, guilt, and regret are seen from a different and healthier perspective. A more balanced point of view not only relieves stress and gives us peace of mind, but is associated with positive mood, equanimity, and emotional resilience.

23. Eases Pain

Yoga eases pain in the joints and the muscles. It helps to manage chronic conditions which induce pain such as fibromyalgia and arthritis. It also improves mood which plays a role in how we perceive pain. People suffering from depression feel and focus on pain more intensely than people who are happy.

24. Helps Control The Intake Of Pharmaceutical Medication

Yoga helps to alleviate the symptoms of many medical conditions. Sufferers of diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, arthritis, and asthma report fewer symptoms when keeping a regular yoga practice, and yoga has been known to help lower the intake of prescribed medication for specific conditions.

25. Helps You Gain Inner Strength

One of the most empowering benefits of yoga is that it gives inner strength. This strength can help you change your life. Yoga can make you conscious of things which you may have been unconscious and unaware of, including bad habits, patterns of behavior, or destructive relationships. It gives the impetus and the drive to get rid of the things that do not serve your best interest and to replace them with more self-serving habits. For example, many practitioners have quit the self-harming habit of smoking due to a newfound self-respect and inner strength.



26. Connection To A Teacher Takes You Beyond

A healthy connection with a good yoga teacher can support you far beyond the physical. A teacher can guide you to connect to your inner self, free from the roles and masks that you may wear in society. A teacher can deliver hard truths with compassion, encouraging you physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A respectful relationship with a teacher goes a long way toward promoting your wellbeing.

27. Empowers

In yoga, you reap what you sow. Your effort on the mat is what matters; no one does your practice for you. If you involve yourself wholly, you benefit to the maximum. This does a few things: 1- You get involved in your own self-care and wellbeing, and you start having a sense of ownership and responsibility over your health. 2- You discover that your involvement gives you the power to effect change in your life. 3- You become more hopeful because you see the relationship between the effort and change. 4- Having hope and faith in yourself and your ability to change is empowering and healing in itself.

28. Stabilizes Emotional Conditions

Yoga helps people cope with emotional conditions such as symptoms of menopause, (hot flashes, sleep disturbances, mood swings, anxiety, depression, and insomnia). Yoga can also help people who suffer from anxiety and panic attacks. Studies suggest that yoga is associated with increased levels of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) a brain chemical linked to positive mood.

29. Builds Self-Awareness

Yoga encourages the practitioner to become more conscious and self-aware. By becoming aware of our feelings, emotions, and behaviors, we can change them for the better. We cannot change what we are unaware of or what we have no knowledge of. Awareness allows us to break free of destructive emotions like anger, and the way these emotions make us behave. Yoga can reduce anger by calming the nervous system and the mind. It trains the mind to create space between an emotion or experience and the reaction to it. As a result, we become less impulsive and more tranquil in our reactions. This equanimity increases the ability to step back from the drama of life and to remain calm in the face of difficult circumstances. We become more conscious of our reactions, the way they impact us, and others around us.

30. Non-Harming

Yogic philosophy incorporates the concept of *ahimsa*, the practice of non-violence to self and others. A yoga practice develops personal qualities such as compassion, generosity, empathy, understanding, friendliness, and equanimity. Often people find that they become more caring and sympathetic of other people's position. The compassionate aspect of a yoga practice and karma yoga (self-less service to others) makes one feel with those who are less fortunate. This can translate behaviorally through activities such as volunteering or performing charitable deeds. Compassion puts one's own life in perspective; one's problems may seem smaller and less daunting, and one feels a greater sense of gratitude. ■