

1. Builds muscle strength and increases flexibility

Strong muscles do more than look good. They also protect us from conditions like arthritis and back pain, and help prevent falls as we age. While you build strength through yoga, you also balance it with targeted stretching to create flexibility. If you just went to the gym and lifted weights, you might build strength but lose flexibility.

Improved flexibility is one of the first and most obvious benefits of yoga. You'll also notice that aches and pains start to disappear. That's no coincidence. Tight hamstrings can lead to a flattening of the lumbar spine, which can cause back pain. And inflexibility in muscles and connective tissue, such as fascia and ligaments, can cause poor posture. Becoming more flexible is the antidote to these problems.

2. Improves posture and protects the spine

Your head is like a bowling ball—big, round, and heavy. When it's balanced directly over an erect spine, it takes much less work for your neck and back muscles to support it. Move it several inches forward, however, and you start to strain those muscles. Hold up that forward-leaning bowling ball for eight or twelve hours a day and it's no wonder you're tired, but fatigue might not be your only problem. Poor posture can cause back, neck, and other muscle and joint problems. As you slump, your body may compensate by flattening the normal inward curves in your neck and lower back. This can cause pain and degenerative arthritis of the spine. Practicing Yoga helps improve awareness of how you are sitting and standing so you will be more likely to self-correct your posture as you continue to build strength in the supporting muscles.

Spinal discs, the shock absorbers between the vertebrae that can herniate and compress nerves, crave movement. That's the only way they get their nutrients. If you've got a well-balanced yoga practice with plenty of backbends, forward bends, and twists, you'll help keep your discs supple and healthy. In a study conducted at California State University, Los Angeles, yoga practice increased bone density in the vertebrae to keep them healthy and strong and support good posture with less pain.

3. Strengthens bones and prevents cartilage and joint breakdown

It is well documented that weight-bearing exercise strengthens bones and helps ward off osteoporosis. Some postures in yoga require that you lift your own weight. And some, like Downward and Upward Facing Dog, help strengthen the arm bones, which are particularly vulnerable to osteoporotic fractures. Yoga's ability to lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol may help the bones retain calcium and keep them stronger.

Each time you practice yoga, you take your joints through their full range of motion. This can help prevent degenerative arthritis or mitigate disability by "squeezing and soaking" areas of cartilage that are not normally used. Joint cartilage is like a sponge; it receives fresh nutrients only when its fluid is squeezed out and a new supply can be soaked up. Without proper sustenance, neglected areas of cartilage can eventually wear out, exposing the underlying bone like worn-out brake pads, causing pain, stiffness, and limited range of motion. A yoga practice offers guidance to discover appropriate movement that feels good and is beneficial for you.

4. Releases tension in your limbs

Do you ever notice yourself holding the telephone or a steering wheel with a death grip or scrunching your face when staring at a computer screen? These unconscious habits can lead to chronic tension, muscle fatigue, and soreness in the wrists, arms, shoulders, neck, and face, which can increase stress and worsen your mood. As you practice yoga, you

begin to notice where you hold tension: It might be in your shoulders, hands, stomach, or the muscles of your face and neck. If you simply tune in, you become more aware of this self-induced tension and encourage relaxation using mind focus and breathing techniques.

5. Improves balance to decrease risk of falling

Regularly practicing yoga increases proprioception (the ability to feel what your body is doing and where it is in space) and improves balance. People with bad posture or dysfunctional movement patterns usually have poor proprioception, which has been linked to knee problems and back pain. Better balance could mean fewer falls. For the elderly, this translates into more independence and delayed admission to a nursing home or never entering one at all. For the rest of us, postures like Tree Pose can make us feel more balanced and grounded both in our practice and our lives off the mat.

6. Increases blood flow and drains lymph to boost immunity

Yoga gets your blood flowing. More specifically, the relaxation exercises you learn in yoga can help your circulation, especially in your hands and feet. Yoga also gets more oxygen to your cells, which will function better as a result. Twisting poses are thought to wring out venous blood from internal organs and allow oxygenated blood to flow in once the twist is released. Inverted poses, such as Headstand, Handstand, and Shoulderstand, encourage venous blood from the legs and pelvis to flow back to the heart, where it can be pumped to the lungs to be freshly oxygenated. This can help if you have swelling in your legs from heart or kidney problems. Yoga also boosts levels of hemoglobin and red blood cells, which carry oxygen to the tissues, and it thins the blood by making platelets less sticky and by cutting the level of clot-promoting proteins in the blood. This can lead to a decrease in heart attacks and strokes since blood clots are often the cause of these medical conditions.

When you contract and stretch muscles and come in and out of yoga postures, you increase the drainage of lymph (body fluid rich in immune cells). This helps the lymphatic system fight infection, destroy cancerous cells, and dispose of the toxic waste products of cellular functioning.

7. Lowers blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol and regulates the adrenal glands

Two studies of people with hypertension, published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, compared the effects of Savasana (a resting pose) with simply lying on a couch. After three months, Savasana was associated with a 26-point drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) and a 15-point drop in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number), and the higher the initial blood pressure, the bigger the drop.

Yoga lowers blood sugar and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and boosts HDL (“good”) cholesterol. In people with diabetes, yoga has been found to lower blood sugar in several ways: by lowering cortisol and adrenaline levels, encouraging weight loss, and improving sensitivity to the effects of insulin. Get your blood sugar levels down, and you decrease your risk of diabetic complications such as heart attack, kidney failure, and blindness.

The adrenal glands secrete cortisol in response to an acute crisis, which temporarily boosts immune function. If your cortisol levels stay high even after the crisis, they can compromise the immune system. Chronically high levels undermine memory and may lead to permanent changes in the brain. Additionally, excessive cortisol has been linked with major depression, osteoporosis (it extracts calcium and other minerals from bones), high blood pressure, and insulin resistance. In rats, high cortisol levels lead to what researchers call “food-seeking behavior” (the kind that drives you to eat when you’re upset, angry, or stressed). The body takes those extra calories and distributes them as fat in the abdomen, contributing to weight gain and the risk of diabetes and heart attack. Yoga helps to lower cortisol levels to counteract the effects of chronic stress.

8. Prevents IBS and other digestive problems

Ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, constipation—all of these can be exacerbated by stress. So if you stress less, you'll suffer less. Yoga, like any physical exercise, can ease constipation—and theoretically lower the risk of colon cancer—because moving the body aids in detoxification and facilitates more regular transport of food and waste products through the bowels.

9. Relaxes the nervous system and increases focus

Yoga encourages you to relax, slow your breath, and focus on the present, shifting the balance from the sympathetic nervous system (the fight-or-flight response) to the parasympathetic nervous system. The latter is calming and restorative; it lowers breathing and heart rates, decreases blood pressure, and increases blood flow to the intestines and reproductive organs, comprising what Herbert Benson, M.D., calls the relaxation response.

An important component of yoga is focusing on the present. Studies have found that regular yoga practice improves coordination, reaction time, memory, and even IQ scores. People who practice meditation in their yoga practice demonstrate the ability to solve problems and acquire and recall information better; probably because they have become more focused and less distracted by relentless thoughts of an overactive mind.

10. Helps with better breathing and encourages a restful night's sleep

Yogis tend to take fewer breaths of greater volume, which is both calming and more efficient. A 1998 study published in *The Lancet* taught a yogic technique known as “complete breathing” to people with lung problems due to congestive heart failure. After one month, their average respiratory rate decreased from 13.4 breaths per minute to 7.6. Meanwhile, their exercise capacity increased significantly, as did the oxygen saturation of their blood. In addition, yoga has been shown to improve various measures of lung function, including the maximum volume of the breath and the efficiency of the exhalation.

Yoga also promotes breathing through the nose, which filters the air, warms it (cold, dry air is more likely to trigger an asthma attack in people who are sensitive), and humidifies it, removing pollen and dirt and other things that may irritate the lungs.

Yoga can provide relief from the hustle and bustle of modern life because while some stimulation is good, too much of it taxes the nervous system. Restorative asana, yoga nidra (a form of guided relaxation), savasana, pranayama, and meditation encourage pratyahara, a turning inward of the senses, which provides downtime for the nervous system. Another by-product of a regular yoga practice, studies suggest, is better sleep—which means you'll be less tired and stressed and less likely to be anxious and distracted.

11. Increases self-esteem and gives you inner strength

Many of us suffer from chronic low self-esteem. If you handle this negatively, take drugs, overeat, work too hard, etc., you may pay the price in poorer health physically, mentally, and spiritually. If you take a positive approach and practice yoga, you'll sense, initially in brief glimpses and later in more sustained views, that you're worthwhile or, as yogic philosophy teaches, that you are a manifestation of the Divine. If you practice regularly with an intention of self-examination and curiosity you can access a different side of yourself. You'll experience feelings of gratitude, empathy, and forgiveness, as well as a sense of being more connected with nature and more open to the world around you.

Yoga can help you make changes in your life. In fact, that might be its greatest strength. Tapas, the Sanskrit word for “heat,” is the fire, the discipline that fuels yoga practice and that regular practice builds. The tapas you develop can be extended to the rest of your life to overcome inertia and change dysfunctional habits. You may find that without making

a particular effort to change things, you start to eat better, exercise more, or finally quit smoking after years of failed attempts.

12. Eases your pain and brings peace of mind

Yoga can ease your pain. According to several studies, asana, meditation, or a combination of the two, reduced pain in people with arthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia, carpal tunnel syndrome, and other chronic conditions. When you relieve your pain, your mood improves, you're more inclined to be active, and you don't need as much medication.

Yoga soothes the fluctuations of the mind, according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. In other words, it slows down the mental loops of frustration, regret, anger, fear, and desire that can cause stress. And since stress is implicated in so many health problems—from migraines and insomnia to lupus, MS, eczema, high blood pressure, and heart attacks—if you learn to quiet your mind, you'll be likely to live longer and healthier.

13. Helps keep you drug free and guides your body's healing in your mind's eye

If your medicine cabinet looks like a pharmacy, maybe it's time to try yoga. Studies of people with asthma, high blood pressure, Type II diabetes (formerly called adult-onset diabetes), and obsessive-compulsive disorder have shown that yoga helped them lower their dosage of medications and sometimes get off them entirely. By taking fewer drugs you'll spend less money, and you're less likely to suffer side effects and risk dangerous drug interactions.

If you contemplate an image in your mind's eye, as you do in yoga nidra and other practices, you can effect change in your body. Several studies have found that guided imagery reduced postoperative pain, decreased the frequency of headaches, and improved the quality of life for people with cancer and HIV.

14. Builds awareness for transformation and encourages self-care

Yoga and meditation build awareness. And the more aware you are, the easier it is to break free of destructive emotions like anger. Studies suggest that chronic anger and hostility are as strongly linked to heart attacks as are smoking, diabetes, and elevated cholesterol. Yoga works to reduce anger by increasing feelings of compassion and interconnection and by calming the nervous system and the mind. It also increases your ability to step back from the drama of your own life, to remain steady in the face of bad news or unsettling events. You can still react quickly when you need to, and there's evidence that yoga speeds reaction time, but you can take that split second to choose a more thoughtful approach, reducing suffering for yourself and others.

In much of conventional medicine, most patients are passive recipients of care. In yoga, it's what you do for yourself that matters. Yoga gives you the tools to help you change, and you might start to feel better the first time you try practicing. You may also notice that the more you commit to practice, the more you benefit. This results in three things: You get involved in your own care; you discover that your involvement gives you the power to effect change, and seeing that you can affect change gives you hope. And hope itself can be healing.

15. Benefits your relationships and connects you with guidance

Love may not conquer all, but it certainly can aid in healing. Cultivating the emotional support of friends, family, and community has been demonstrated repeatedly to improve health and healing. A regular yoga practice helps develop friendliness, compassion, and greater equanimity. Along with yogic philosophy's emphasis on avoiding harm to others, telling the truth, and taking only what you need, this may improve many of your relationships.

Good yoga teachers can do wonders for your health. Exceptional ones do more than guide you through the postures. They can adjust your posture, gauge when you should go deeper in poses or back off, deliver hard truths with compassion, help you relax, and enhance and personalize your practice. A respectful relationship with a teacher goes a long way toward promoting your health.

As you read all the ways yoga improves your health, you probably noticed a lot of overlap. That's because they're intensely interwoven. Change your posture and you change the way you breathe. Change your breathing and you change your nervous system. This is one of the great lessons of yoga: Everything is connected—your hipbone to your anklebone, you to your community, your community to the world. This interconnection is vital to understanding yoga. This holistic system simultaneously taps into many mechanisms that have a profound affect over time. This synergy may be the most important way of all that yoga heals.