

## **The Benefits of Yoga**

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The word Yoga means union with the divine. It is a physical exercise that helps with the body as well as the mind. The goal of yoga is union with the Absolute, also known as Brahman, the true self. Practicing Yoga will help reap the benefits of physical fitness, mental clarity, self-understanding, stress control, and a general well-being while also working on the seven energy centers of the body. Yoga is the combination of gentle and vigorous stretching that helps the body keep a balanced energy flow.

Yoga originated in India and it dates back to about five to six thousand years ago. Since the creation of yoga there have been many different branches off the original idea, for example: Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Tantra Yoga. Hatha Yoga is the most common type of Yogic practice. It focuses on physical movements along with breathing techniques. Raja Yoga is the practice of study and meditation hoping to produce a well-rounded individual. It is also called the "royal road" because it combines the exercise and breathing with meditation. Bhakti Yoga is the practice of extreme devotion in one-pointed concentration upon the concept of God. Karma Yoga is the concept of God in work of any kind and all movements. Tantra Yoga is the way to show the unseen consciousness in form through specific words, diagrams, and movements. From a single creation of one idea many years ago, Yoga has branched out into many different types while still practicing one main idea, and that is to remember to breathe!

Hatha Yoga has at least six key benefits, and each Yoga posture has a name and a purpose. The Half Moon is the first posture because it warms up the body and prepares it for more strenuous stretches. One key benefit is that it releases toxins, tension, and stress. Another key benefit is that it improves balance and builds concentration. This is achieved by holding the postures while remaining focused. The key is to look at something and not take your eyes off it. Some people try to close their eyes but they will find it creates dizziness.

Two postures that help with balance are The Balancing Stick Pose and The Head to Knee. In the Balancing Stick Pose, the arms are up by the ears, and as you bend forward, the leg is extended straight out behind making the body parallel to the floor. In the Head to Knee posture, the leg is extended forward while bending down for the forehead to touch the knee, meanwhile standing on one leg with the knee locked. Another benefit to Hatha Yoga is that it tones the body by holding the postures while also having cardiovascular benefits that burn fat. The fourth advantage is that Yoga also has a holistic effect on exercising the glands, organs, and endocrine system while increasing circulation and eliminating toxins. Yawning and sighing release toxins, tension and stress. After doing a posture, or while in one, the body will want to yawn. That is a sign that you are releasing some tension or stress.

A posture that is good for a headache and taking weight off of the organs is the Head to Floor. The Head to Floor is standing with the legs spread and then bending forward with a straight back and placing the head on the floor. Another positive aspect of Yoga is that it increases flexibility by stretching muscles and increases an already toned muscle. In a Bikram's Hatha Yoga school, Yoga is taught in a room that is one hundred to one hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit. Temperature controlled yoga rooms make it easier for the muscles to stretch. If you're not in a room with a hot temperature, please remember that when trying to increase flexibility, the key is to remember to not over do it. Stretching a little bit at a time is the correct way to accomplish muscle flexibility. And at last but not least, Yoga nourishes. The slow gentle movements with the deep breathing will help to energize the body to handle the tasks of everyday life. Combining all of the six key ideas that are listed above, your body will thank you tremendously by feeling better and centered in the mind, body, and soul.

Yoga also focuses on the seven chakras of the body. Chakras are the seven major energy centers in the body and they all have their own center, purpose, and color. They are located in the spine and go to the crown of the head. Chakra also means "whirling disks of light". When doing certain postures while concentrating, an intense inner light can be felt and seen. This is usually felt in the Corpse pose. The Corpse pose is lying on your back while letting your feet fall open with palms up next to your body. This pose is done after strenuous stretching.

Muladhara, Chakra one, means "root" and is located in the base of the spine and its color is red. Its center is survival, stability and self-sufficiency. Yoga postures that help keep the energy flowing are the Bridge, the Locust, and the Half Warrior.

Svadhithana, Chakra two, means "sweetness" and is located between the belly button and pelvic bone. Its color is orange and its center is sexuality, creativity, relationships, and emotions. Postures for this chakra include the Cobra, Dog, Cat, Boat, and Balancing Bear.

Manipura, Chakra three, means "lustrous gem" and is located between the belly button and bottom of the rib cage. The color of this chakra is yellow and its center is personal power, self- esteem, willfulness and energy. Some of the Yoga postures include the Bow, the Warrior one and two, and the Half Circle.

Anahata, Chakra four, means "not stuck" and is located at the heart. Its color is green and the center is love, compassion, acceptance, and trust. Postures for this Chakra include the Fish, Pigeon, Camel, Standing Backbend, and the Prayer Twist. It is important to remember not to push yourself too far- especially when practicing the camel pose. The Camel posture is when you are on your knees with your feet six inches apart and you slowly bend backward to place the hands on the bottom of the feet. This posture puts the body in the shape of a square. If this is done incorrectly, serious injury can occur in the lower back.

Vissudha, Chakra five, means "purification" and is located in the throat. Its color is bright blue and its center is communication, inspiration, expression, and faith. The postures include: Camel, Fish, and Half Shoulder Stand. These Yoga postures also benefit the thyroid gland.

Ajna, Chakra six, means "to perceive" and is located between the eyebrows. The indigo blue color is for the psychic, emotional and mental intelligence of the body.

The Yoga postures for this Chakra include the Child's Pose, which is used to relax the body, the Seated Head to Knee, which helps with the sciatic nerve, and meditation that calms the nerves and increases mental clarity.

Sahasara, Chakra seven, means "thousand petaled" and is located at the crown of the head. Its colors are white or violet and its purpose is devotion, inspiration, selflessness, and spiritual understanding. Postures include the Yoga Mudra, Head Stand, the Mountain, and meditation.

Yoga has multiple benefits for the body and many people use it as their only form of exercise. Yoga postures combine physical fitness with mental clarity, which also helps the internal body as well. A great yogi Rama of Hardiwar and Kashmir once stated, "Yoga makes the rough road smooth" ([WilmingtonYoga.com](http://WilmingtonYoga.com)). The practice of Yoga will help eliminate tension, stress, and create mental clarity by doing some of the postures listed above. Yoga puts you in tune with your body. The body speaks to us in many forms, for example, hunger, thirst, and sexual drive. Yoga allows the body to hear what it is trying to say. I have noticed that since I have begun yoga, my posture, mental state, and the all round well-being of my body has improved. Another yogi who has made an incredible statement Lakshamanjoo of Kashmir said, " You are the same person for whom you are longing" ([WilmingtonYoga.com](http://WilmingtonYoga.com)).

Many people wonder if Yoga is a religion. No it is not. The practice of Yoga comes from within the individual. Practicing Yoga will not interfere with any religion, it is a system that helps manage stress, increase flexibility, and promotes relaxation. Anyone of any age, religion, race, or even pregnant can practice yoga. However, always check with your doctor just to make sure it's right for you.

The practice of Yoga is centuries old. The fact that the practice of Yoga continues into the twenty first century is a testament to its ability to heal, nourish, and rejuvenate the body, mind and soul. And the interest for learning Yoga is spreading with rapid popularity. "Many physicians now recommend Yoga practice to patients at risk for heart disease, as well as those with back pain, arthritis, depression, and other chronic conditions"([AmericanYogaAssociation.com](http://AmericanYogaAssociation.com)).

All in all, the most important thing about Yoga is to remember to breathe. The correct way to practice Yoga is to take a deep breath through the nose before moving in to the posture and exhale as you move. Without deep breathing, toxins, tension, and stress cannot be released from the body. Learning how to increase lung capacity comes in the practice of Yoga as well. That is taught by taking a breath until you can feel your lungs expand in your back. The second step is to exhale the breath out of the body until the stomach muscles contract. Deep breathing is taught when lying in the Corpse Pose after the session is about to be over. It helps relax the body and prepare it for our daily tasks. With the widespread interest in Yoga today, hopefully more people will try Yoga. If they do they will discover all of the wonderful benefits of having a feeling of a centered spirit, self-understanding, flexible muscles, and mental clarity. What more could you want?