

Yoga: Simple Stretches for Seniors

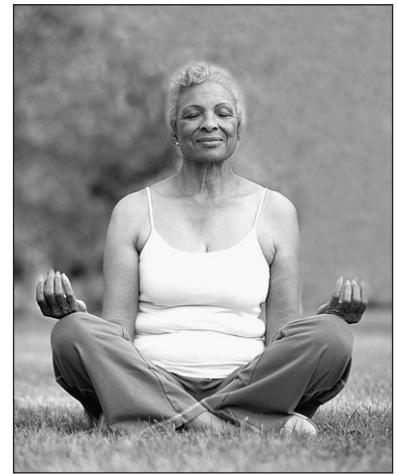
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The goal of yoga is to attain a state of deep spiritual insight and tranquility.

What is Yoga?

Yoga is a physical, mental and spiritual discipline involving controlled breathing, body positions and meditation. The goal of yoga is to attain a state of deep spiritual insight and tranquility. In a world of diet and exercise fads, yoga exercise has stood the test of time. It is said to be over 5,000 years old and is believed to have been developed in northern India. Today, yoga is very popular in the United States. There were an estimated 20.4 million people in the United States participating in 2012.



Yoga is for everyone! When you picture yoga, do you imagine complex and difficult positions requiring great balance and flexibility? Yoga does not have to be difficult or treacherous. Gentle stretching and breathing exercises, for example, can be done by beginners. Yoga exercise can be done in a chair or utilizing a wall for balance. The gentle, low impact nature of the exercises make it ideal for individuals of all fitness levels.

What to Expect in a Yoga Class

There are many variations and levels of difficulty in yoga. Classes are typically labeled as beginner, intermediate or advanced. Check your local gym or yoga studio to determine when classes are held near you. Types of yoga you might encounter include:

- *Hatha or Vinyasa Yoga:* Likely to cover basic yoga poses and be slow paced and gentle.
- *Ashtanga or Power Yoga:* Likely to be fast paced and intense with multiple poses and continuous movement.
- *Hot Yoga/Bikram:* Practiced in a hot room (105 degrees Fahrenheit) to allow loosening of tight muscles and encourage sweating as a method of cleansing.

Do you feel nervous about attending a yoga class or hesitant to incur the expense? Consider trying yoga at home! There are exercise

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videos available on DVD for a minimal cost or online for free. There are many pictures of poses available for free online. Remember, to avoid injury, consult a physician before beginning any exercise routine. Poses may feel awkward at first as you are placing your body in new positions. But, if at any time you feel pain, stop immediately. Listen to your body and respect its limitations.

Whether at a class or at home, remember the following tips:

- Wear comfortable clothing;
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after practicing yoga;
- Don't eat right before practicing;
- Practice on a non-slip surface with bare feet and have a chair nearby. Consider purchasing a yoga mat (a thin rubber mat that can be rolled up and carried); and
- Be patient. Yoga exercise takes time and practice. Yoga is not competitive and should be taken at a comfortable pace.

Health Benefits of Yoga

Yoga has both physical and emotional benefits. Yoga emphasizes breathing, focus and concentration. These practices reduce your stress level and lower your blood pressure by allowing you to reach a state of relaxation and tranquility. Yoga poses also improve your balance, flexibility, range of motion and strength by strengthening your core muscles. Strong core muscles can reduce the risk of injury and falls during regular daily activities or other exercises. Regular participation can also help with maintaining or losing weight. Like many exercises, practicing yoga can:

- Reduce stress and anxiety;
- Improve your mood;
- Improve your sense of well-being;
- Lower your heart rate;
- Contribute to weight loss/maintenance; and
- Reduce body pain.

Yoga Basics

Breathing and Focus

Yoga exercise typically begins with a focus on the breath. When practicing yoga, breathe slowly and deeply, in and out through the nose. Focus on your own breath and notice the movement in your chest and stomach.

Light Stretches

Another important part of yoga is gentle stretching. This is a great way to enhance flexibility, lubricate joints and decrease stress. Yoga stretching is often prescribed for relief of body pain from pregnancy, menopause or chronic diseases (like arthritis).

Balance

Balance is a staple of practicing yoga. Yoga emphasizes physical, spiritual and mental balance. The majority of yoga poses involve balancing exercises that strengthen core muscles.

Resources

www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/yoga/art-20044733

www.webmd.com/balance/guide/the-health-benefits-of-yoga

www.seniorfitness.net/YOGA.htm

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/yoga.aspx

nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga/introduction.htm

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