



WHY DO YOGA ?

Studies of the benefits of yoga are only beginning to accumulate and so the evidence is not overwhelming or conclusive at this point. However, this is not to say that yoga isn't good for you, and the short list of studies may indicate a trend toward, or possibility of, benefits. Below is a brief review of some of the available yoga research.

High blood pressure (hypertension). Many people believe that practicing yoga can help lower blood pressure by teaching breathing techniques and reducing stress. It is true that lifestyle changes like regular physical activity and stress management can help lower and manage blood pressure, but it doesn't do so in all cases. As for yoga, there hasn't been enough research to make firm claims. The American Heart Association Report on Prevention, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure does not mention yoga even once. However, there is some indication that yoga can help. In one study, small but significant reductions in blood pressure were shown in just three weeks of daily yoga, and in another study, one hour of daily yoga for 11 weeks revealed that both meditation and yoga were effective in controlling hypertension. In one of the best quantitative studies, systolic blood pressure (the top number) decreased from 142 to 126mmHg and diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number) decreased from 86 to 75mmHg after 40 days of a yoga regimen. These results do not mean that you should stop taking your blood pressure medication if you start practicing yoga (you should never go off medication without the approval of your doctor). More research needs to be done, but I think it's fair to say that if yoga helps you manage stress, calm yourself, and gets your muscles toned and strong, then there's at least a chance it can help with blood pressure, too.

Mood. After just one yoga class, men reported decreases in tension, fatigue, and anger after yoga, and women reported fairly similar mood benefits. It's well known that physical activity has a mood-elevating effect, and yoga ought to fit right in.

Cognition and quality of life. A group of 135 men and women 65-85 years of age participated in six months of Hatha yoga classes, and at the end of the study, they reported improvements in quality of life, well-being, energy, and fatigue. They also did better on balance (one-legged standing) and forward flexibility (bending).

Diabetes. There is some evidence to suggest that yoga may lower blood glucose. After just eight days of yoga in 98 men and women 20-74 years of age, fasting glucose was better than at the beginning of the study, but subjects in this study were also exposed to dietary counseling and other lifestyle interventions, and so it's difficult to know if the yoga on its own was responsible for the changes.

Carpal tunnel syndrome. Individuals with carpal tunnel syndrome who did yoga twice a week for eight weeks had less pain in their wrists than people with carpal tunnel who wore a splint. The effect may be due to improved grip strength in the yoga subjects.

Strength and flexibility. In one of the most persuasive yoga studies, men and women 18-27 years of age who participated in two yoga sessions per week for eight weeks increased the strength in their arms from 19% to 31%, and by 28% in their legs. Their ankle flexibility, shoulder elevation, trunk extension, and trunk flexion increased by 13%, 155%, 188%, and 14%, respectively!

Asthma. There is some evidence to show that reducing symptoms of asthma and even reduction in asthma medication are the result of regular yoga. Again, this doesn't mean that you should stop taking your asthma medication if you start practicing yoga, but it does suggest that there could be some positive result, and you should ask your doctor if you have a question about it.