

Yoga for Everyone

by Kellye Campbell, MN, ARNP,
ACA Medical Advisory Committee Member

“What — that Medical Advisory Committee is trying to get me to participate in another far-fetched activity? Isn't yoga for people wearing flowing robes and saying ‘Ohhhhhmmmm’?”

General Physical and Spiritual Benefits

Although yoga is an ancient practice, it has modern applications for people with and without disabilities. The philosophy of yoga espouses acceptance and encouragement of what the individual yoga practitioner, or yogi, is able to do. Practitioners and instructors of this ancient art welcome, encourage and accept newcomers of any level of ability. Although many yogis are not visibly disabled, all yogis practice the discipline with hopes of some type of benefit, such as to decrease various types of pain, improve posture, enhance balance and stamina, or to generally enhance health and well-being. With these types of benefits to offer, it is no wonder that people of all ages, abilities, sizes and health conditions are able to benefit from yoga.

Yoga is rewarding in both physical and spiritual realms. Perhaps yoga's most well-known benefits are those of stress management and increased psychological well-being. However, yoga adds physical conditioning, strength, balance, and self-confidence to psychological and spiritual benefits. To put it in today's



terms, yoga is a “one-stop shopping” physical activity.

The most basic element of yoga is proper oxygenation of the body. Do you think you know how to breathe properly? Despite going through labor and delivery breathing training for three babies, it has taken me over a year to feel the full benefits of the breath training offered by yoga. Breathing is the basic element of life. The more efficient your breathing becomes, the more helpful it is to your bodily processes. If you derive only one benefit from yoga, let it be the knowledge and practice of proper breathing.

Specific Health Benefits

Yoga has been scientifically studied and discovered to be helpful in decreasing the negative effects of many illnesses. For example, yoga may control and/or prevent the effects of coronary artery disease; improve control of asthma; decrease high blood pressure; treat both rheumatoid and osteoarthritis pain; decrease pain, dizziness and other effects of multiple sclerosis; treat pain and lack of sensation due to various types of peripheral neuropathy; and even improve blood sugar



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control in diabetes mellitus! Back, neck, hand and carpal tunnel pain have been reported to decrease with regular yoga practice. Yoga has even been shown to improve digestion and immune system function.

In addition to breathing, stress management, and benefits for various types of health condi-



tions, yoga builds strength in all parts of the body. Flexibility is a key goal, and one that new yogis find most challenging. Improved flexibility is a gradual process, so the time to start working on this benefit is now, before you become even more stiff! Balance is another area in which yoga offers invaluable practice. Who among us can honestly say we have never fallen, or been in danger of falling? Posture also changes when one loses a limb. Posture is an essential element of yoga, and one that takes ongoing work.

Although no medical studies have been published regarding the benefits of yoga for people with limb loss, there has been a wealth of research published relating benefits for limb-loss-related conditions. That said, why wait to try yoga?

How to Get Started

Intrigued, but still intimidated, about learning yoga? Here are some tips to make getting started easy and fun.

- Watch a class before joining. Speak with the instructor before trying your first class. Ask for suggestions on modifying certain *asanas* (yoga poses) for someone

with your specific health condition. This would also be a good time to ask about whether or not your specific type of prosthesis may help you in class, or if it's better to participate without it. A good portion of yoga is done on the floor, and it's even possible to participate from a chair.

- Find out about classes from natural food stores, health clubs, your healthcare provider or your local library or university. Many community centers offer low-cost options. My gym membership costs \$25/month and includes unlimited access to as many yoga classes as I want to take.
- Go with a friend for moral support.
- Sit in the back of the room if you feel self-conscious (guaranteed: other yogis will be too busy attending to their own yoga practice to pay much attention to you).

- If the idea of a class is still too intimidating, consider starting out with a book or a video in the privacy of your own home. The disadvantage is a lack of access to an instructor who could suggest *asana* modifications.
- Gather your equipment. Everyone needs a yoga mat. These are available at sporting goods stores, gyms and discount stores. A mat costs \$10 to \$20, so it's not too expensive. In terms of clothing, you should wear loose, stretchy clothing that's easy to move around in. You don't need to invest in spandex before you're ready!
- There may be unfamiliar moves and new terminology, but you can feel good about what you're able to do and understand. Remember, the attitude of yoga is acceptance, encouragement and approval. Most instructors offer time after class if you have questions or problems.

Yoga is fun and offers many health benefits. If you're still not convinced to try yoga, you can "wow" your friends, relatives and Medical Advisory Committee members with your knowledge of Sanskrit, the "official" language of yoga. See you on the mat!

About the Author



Kellye Campbell, MN, ARNP, is a family psychiatric nurse practitioner. She is involved in clinical practice and research with people living with limb loss and other

disabilities. She is associated with the University of Washington as well as the Veterans' Administration R&D Center of Excellence for Limb Loss Prevention and Prosthetic Engineering.

Practice With Care

by Tom Bayless

Any new exercise should be approached with caution and accurate knowledge, including yoga. Although the practice of yoga is predominantly low-impact, injuries can happen to beginners as well as veterans. According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 3,700 yoga-related injuries were treated in 2004. But many of these injuries can be easily avoided with preparation, awareness, and a little common sense.

- Talking to a professional yoga instructor or attending a class is the ideal way to get you started in the learning process and to teach you to listen to your body for signs of pain.
- Starting slow is an important step in any new exercise, and with yoga, it's essential to getting off on the right foot.
- Attempting a challenging pose when not yet flexible or strong enough can lead to injury, or it can worsen an existing pain or injury.



- When your body talks, listen. With an exercise as slow and precise as yoga, your body can reach its limits more easily than with higher-impact exercises, such as weightlifting or cardio (such as jogging or biking).
- Improper poses are common causes of injury.
- Doing a specific yoga maneuver wrong the first time may not do any initial damage, but repeatedly doing the move incorrectly can lead to straining muscles and joints to the point of injury. Practicing yoga under expert supervision will teach you to do the moves correctly, every time.
- Most yoga-related injuries occur from repetitive movements, when connective tissues are weakened from being in a certain position over and over. An adequate amount of rest between movements can help ease the constant strain on the muscles in use.
- If injured, it is very important to rest the problem area for days, if not weeks, before using it again. If the injury progresses, see a doctor immediately.