

Health Insights Today

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Breathing and Moving with Yoga

By Ashley Cleveland, DC

Yoga has become part of American culture. It seems that it is everywhere today, from Oprah to E! Entertainment television. In magazines and television interviews, celebrities describe how yoga has changed not just their bodies, but also their entire lives. Studies indicate that 16.5 million Americans practice yoga on a regular basis. Sales of yoga classes and all the products to support a yoga lifestyle presently total a whopping \$3 billion a year!¹

Why all the American yogis and yoginis? Why all the products? What does yoga have to offer that isn't contained in other health and fitness routines? Over the course of several articles, we will answer these questions, and many others, about yoga. Perhaps we will even stimulate you to try a yoga class.

Yoga seems to have made its first appearance in the United States in the nineteenth century. Transcendentalists and, later, Theosophists read works of Indian philosophy, such as the Bhagavad Gita, learning in the process about a discipline called yoga. Most historians trace the real rise of yoga, though, to the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions where Vivekananda spoke to the crowd about Hinduisim and yoga. Of course, for some Americans the linkage of yoga with Hinduisim has been troubling, but the practice of yoga does not require the adoption of any religious belief.

The most basic translation of the word yoga is union. Yogic disciplines, primarily movement and breath, seek to unite the body and mind, to quiet the nervous system, and to generate health. Though developed more than a thousand years ago, yogic disciplines continue to be effective today as demonstrated by findings from scientific studies. These studies show that a consistent yoga practice can help with migraines,² weight management,³⁻⁵ high blood pressure,^{3,6,7} asthma and allergies,^{3,8,9} and back pain.^{3,10,11} New low back pain guidelines from the American College of Physicians and American Pain Society also endorse yoga practice for subacute and chronic low back pain.¹²

Adding a yoga practice to your life can make a tremendous impact on your health and the way you feel about your body. In the next column we'll describe various styles of yoga that are popular in the United States and talk about choosing a teacher and style that's right for you.

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