

Benefits and Limitations of Yoga **By Carissa Seng**

The word “Yoga” means “to join”, to bring together the mind and body. According to *Dance Magazine* Yoga is both a state of being and a set of codified exercises, grounded in a rich history that spans nearly 4,000 years. The physical poses are called asanas, a Sanskrit term meaning, “seat”. *Inside MS* notes that controlled breathing is used as a way to focus and link the mind to the way the body works.

Benefits of Yoga

Health Magazine author Jeanne Laskas explains in her article, “Stop Stress Where it Lives” that practicing Yoga is beneficial in fighting stress. Through establishing a strong mind-body connection, yoga is thought to create solace, inspiration, and reconnection. Meditation focuses the mind and relaxes the body. Together with deep breathing, meditation creates a quiet calm frame of mind, reduces stress and increases energy levels. Repetitions of meditation, combined with proper breathing and yoga postures are considered the key to achieving Yoga’s benefits.

Much of the healing power of Yoga and meditation is in the psychological realm. It is believed that Yoga reduces stress, improves mental clarity and contributes to a positive outlook. *The Berkeley Medical Journal* explains the value of a positive outlook. A study by Martin Seligman, Ph.D. of University of Pennsylvania “found that pessimists are more likely than optimists to develop more severe physical, hormonal, and immunological responses to negative environmental factors”

Other studies have further demonstrated the psychological benefits of Yoga in relation to mood enhancement. *The Journal of Perceptual and Motor Skills* notes that in a study of 87 college students Yoga participants reported greater decreases in scores on Anger, Confusion, Tension, and Depression sections of mood inventories than did control students.

A great body of research has been conducted on the numerous benefits of Yoga. In addition to the psychological benefits of reduced stress and elevated mood, Yoga increases strength, flexibility, coordination, and range of motion. Furthermore, studies have also shown that Yoga has substantial physiological benefits such as decreased blood pressure, slower respiration rate, and improved fitness of the myocardium (heart).

Yoga and meditation can assist in treating chronic ailments. A study published by the American Journal of Cardiology examined the effect of Yoga on coronary artery disease (CAD) and chronic, stable angina pectoris. The practice of Yoga by the treatment group revealed a reduced occurrence of heart attacks in those with CAD when compared to the control group.

The Tufts Health & Nutrition Letter states that Yoga can be helpful with chronic conditions like arthritis and osteoporosis. Yoga reduces pain by increasing range of motion, flexibility, and bone and muscle strength. Additionally these conditions are improved with gains in posture, balance, and coordination.

Limitations of Yoga

Yoga may interfere with a strength training program. Yoga qualifies as isometric exercise similar to strength training. Isometric exercise involves the shortening and lengthening of muscles, which requires a recovery period to rebuild the muscle. One must be careful when combining Yoga and strength training to ensure that the body is offered adequate recovery time. If proper recovery time is not present then the body may actually end up losing strength. One may consider performing yoga after strength training sessions as opposed to different days. In this manner, the body is allotted a greater amount of quality rest periods.

Upon beginning the practice of Yoga, the exercise may be progressive in the sense that one advances from easy beginner poses to more strength demanding experienced poses. However, the actual exercise itself is not considered progressive. An exercise is progressive when from session to session the amount of resistance increases. Unless a person gains weight it is impossible to increase the resistance in the same Yoga pose.

In order to change body composition (reduce fat, build muscle) the muscle must progressively encounter greater demands. When a muscle encounters greater demands, it compensates by increasing the size of muscle fiber. This, in turn, raises metabolism and burns fat.

Yoga has been linked to improved overall well being. Regular practice of Yoga has numerous proven health benefits through the entire spectrum: physical, mental, and spiritual. Yoga has also proved effective in coping with chronic conditions like arthritis, angina pectoris, Multiple Sclerosis, low back pain, osteoporosis, cancer, and Parkinson's.

While the benefits of Yoga are extensive, Yoga is not an all-encompassing exercise modality. Strength training and cardiovascular activity should be included in a regimen of Yoga in order to cover the three basic physical fitness areas: strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance.