

What is yoga?

Yoga is an ancient practice that involves physical poses, concentration, and deep breathing.

A regular yoga practice [can promote Trusted Source](#) endurance, strength, calmness, [flexibility](#), and well-being.

Yoga is now a popular form of exercise around the world. According to a [2017 national survey](#), one in seven adults in the United States practiced yoga in the past 12 months.

History

The first mention of the word “yoga” appears in *Rig Veda*, a collection of [ancient texts](#). Yoga comes from the Sanskrit word “yuj,” which means “union” or “to join.”

Yoga can be traced back to northern India over 5,000 years ago.

Indian monks spread their knowledge of yoga in the West during the late 1890s. Modern yoga teachings became widely popular in Western countries by the 1970s.

Philosophy

The overall [philosophy](#) of yoga is about connecting the mind, body, and spirit.

There are six branches of yoga. Each branch represents a different focus and set of characteristics.

The six branches [are](#):

- **Hatha yoga:** This is the physical and mental branch that aims to prime the body and mind.

- **Raja yoga:** This branch involves meditation and strict adherence to a series of disciplinary steps known as the eight limbs of yoga.
- **Karma yoga:** This is a path of service that aims to create a future free from negativity and selfishness.
- **Bhakti yoga:** This aims to establish the path of devotion, a positive way to channel emotions and cultivate acceptance and tolerance.
- **Jnana yoga:** This branch of yoga is about wisdom, the path of the scholar, and developing the intellect through study.
- **Tantra yoga:** This is the pathway of ritual, ceremony, or consummation of a relationship.

Chakras

The word “chakra” [means](#) “spinning wheel.”

Yoga maintains that chakras are center points of energy, thoughts, feelings, and the physical body. According to yogic teachers, chakras determine how people experience reality through emotional reactions, desires or aversions, levels of confidence or fear, and even physical symptoms and effects.

When energy becomes blocked in a chakra, it triggers physical, mental, or emotional imbalances that manifest in symptoms such as [anxiety](#), [lethargy](#), or poor [digestion](#).

Asanas are the many physical poses in Hatha yoga. People who practice yoga use asanas to free energy and stimulate an imbalanced chakra.

There are seven major chakras, each with its own [focus](#):

- **Sahasrara:** The crown chakra, which is at the crown of the head, symbolizes spiritual connection.
- **Ajna:** Located between the eyebrows, the third eye chakra has to do with intuition.
- **Vishuddha:** The throat chakra corresponds to immunity and verbal communication.

- **Anahata:** The heart chakra, which is in the center of the chest, influences professional and personal relationships. Any imbalances in this chakra will affect oxygen, [hormones](#), tissue, and organ control.
- **Manipura:** The solar plexus chakra is in the stomach area. It corresponds to self-confidence, wisdom, and self-discipline.
- **Svadhishthana:** The sacral chakra, which is beneath the belly button, connects pleasure, well-being, and vitality.
- **Muladhara:** The root chakra, which is at the base of the spine, connects the mind and body to the earth to keep a person grounded. It controls the sciatic nerves and the parasympathetic nervous system.

Types

Modern yoga focuses on exercise, strength, agility, and breathing. It [can help](#)^{Trusted Source} boost physical and mental well-being.

There are many styles of yoga. A person should choose a style based on their goals and fitness level.

Types and styles of yoga [include](#):

Ashtanga yoga

This type of yoga practice uses ancient yoga teachings. However, it became popular during the 1970s.

Ashtanga applies the same poses and sequences that rapidly link every movement to breath.

Bikram yoga

People practice Bikram yoga, also known as hot yoga, in artificially heated rooms at a temperature of nearly 105°F and 40% humidity. It consists of 26 poses and a sequence of two breathing exercises.

Hatha yoga

This is a generic term for any type of yoga that teaches physical poses. Hatha classes usually serve as a gentle introduction to the basic poses of yoga.

Iyengar yoga

This type of yoga practice focuses on finding the correct alignment in each pose with the help of a range of props, such as blocks, blankets, straps, chairs, and bolsters.

Kripalu yoga

This type teaches practitioners to know, accept, and learn from the body. A student of Kripalu yoga learns to find their own level of practice by looking inward.

The classes usually begin with breathing exercises and gentle stretches, followed by a series of individual poses and final relaxation.

Kundalini yoga

Kundalini yoga is a system of meditation that aims to release pent-up energy.

A Kundalini yoga class typically begins with chanting and ends with singing. In between, it features asana, pranayama, and meditation that aim to create a specific outcome.

Power yoga

In the late 1980s, practitioners developed this active and athletic type of yoga based on the traditional Ashtanga system.

Sivananda

This system uses a five point philosophy as its foundation.

This philosophy maintains that proper breathing, relaxation, diet, exercise, and positive thinking work together to create a healthy yogic lifestyle.

People practicing Sivananda use 12 basic asanas, which they precede with Sun Salutations and follow with Savasana.

Viniyoga

Viniyoga [focuses](#) on form over function, breath and adaptation, repetition and holding, and the art and science of sequencing.

Yin yoga

Yin yoga places its [focus](#) on holding passive poses for long periods of time. This style of yoga targets deep tissues, ligaments, joints, bones, and fascia.

Prenatal yoga

Prenatal yoga uses poses that practitioners have created with pregnant people in mind. This yoga style can help people get back into shape after giving birth, and support health during pregnancy.

Restorative yoga

This is a relaxing method of yoga. A person spends a restorative yoga class in four or five simple poses, using props such as blankets and bolsters to sink into deep relaxation without exerting any effort when holding the pose.

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Benefits of yoga

According to a [2012 survey](#), 94% of adults who practice yoga do so for wellness reasons.

Yoga has many physical and mental benefits, [including](#) [Trusted Source](#):

- building muscle strength
- enhancing flexibility
- promoting better breathing
- supporting heart health
- helping with treatment for [addiction](#)
- reducing [stress](#), anxiety, [depression](#), and chronic [pain](#)
- improving [sleep](#)
- enhancing overall well-being and quality of life

It is advisable to consult a medical professional, if possible, before starting a yoga practice.

Risks and side effects

Many types of yoga are relatively mild and therefore safe for people when a well-trained instructor is guiding the practice.

It is [rare](#) to incur a serious injury when doing yoga. The most common injuries among people practicing yoga are [sprains](#) and strains.

However, people may wish to consider a few [risk factors](#) [Trusted Source](#) before starting a yoga practice.

A person who is pregnant or has an ongoing medical condition, such as bone loss, [glaucoma](#), or [sciatica](#), should consult a healthcare professional, if possible, before taking up yoga.

Some people may need to modify or avoid some yoga poses that could be risky given their specific condition.

Beginners should avoid advanced poses and difficult techniques, such as Headstand, Lotus Pose, and forceful breathing.

When managing a condition, people should not replace conventional medical care with yoga or postpone seeing a healthcare professional about pain or any other medical problem.

Summary

Yoga is an ancient practice that has changed over time.

Modern yoga focuses on poses designed to stimulate inner peace and physical energy. Ancient yoga did not place as much emphasis on fitness. Instead, it revolved around cultivating mental focus and expanding spiritual energy.

There are many different types of yoga available. The style a person chooses will depend on their expectations and level of physical agility.

People with certain health conditions, such as sciatica, should approach yoga slowly and with caution.

Yoga can help support a balanced, active lifestyle.

What are the health benefits of yoga?

- [Stress](#)
- [Anxiety](#)

- [Depression](#)
- [Lower back pain](#)
- [Quality of life](#)
- [Brain function](#)
- [Heart disease](#)
- [Starting yoga](#)
- [Summary](#)

Yoga is a popular exercise that focuses on breathing, strength, and flexibility. Practicing yoga may provide many physical and mental health benefits.

Between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of people in the United States practicing [yoga](#) increased from [9.5% to 14.3%](#) [Trusted Source](#) in adults and from [3.1% to 8.4%](#) [Trusted Source](#) in children.

The 2012 National Health Interview Survey reported that around [94%](#) [Trusted Source](#) of people who practice yoga in the U.S. do so for wellness reasons. Respondents said that yoga benefits their health by:

- encouraging them to exercise more
- inspiring them to eat more healthfully
- improving their sleep quality
- reducing their [stress](#) levels
- motivating them to reduce alcohol use and smoking

Mounting evidence suggests that yoga may also provide other benefits to health. We list these potential benefits in the sections below.



Reducing stress

Regular yoga practice may help reduce stress and aid relaxation.

People often practice yoga to reduce stress and aid relaxation. Scientists are now learning the mechanisms behind how yoga lowers stress.

Persistent surges of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, may damage blood vessels and elevate [blood pressure](#).

However, research has shown that people who practice yoga regularly have [low cortisol levels](#)[Trusted Source](#).

Studies have also found that practicing yoga for at least 3 months may [lower cortisol and perceived stress](#)[Trusted Source](#) and [reduce pro-inflammatory cytokines](#) that cause [inflammation](#).

Relieving anxiety

Although most people feel anxious from time to time, [anxiety](#) is also a symptom of many conditions, including panic disorder, [social anxiety disorder](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), and [phobias](#).

A [2016 meta-analysis](#)[Trusted Source](#) found that practicing Hatha yoga had a promising effect on anxiety. Yoga was also most beneficial in people who had the highest levels of anxiety at the start of the studies.

An older [study from 2010](#)[Trusted Source](#) demonstrated that yoga improved mood and anxiety levels more than walking. The researchers suggest that this was due to higher levels of the brain chemical gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA).

GABA activity tends to be lower in people with anxiety and mood disorders. The researchers tested GABA activity and found that yoga increased GABA levels in the participants.

A [2017 study](#) evaluated whether school based yoga practice could help children experiencing anxiety. Practicing yoga at the beginning of the school day for 8 weeks improved their well-being and emotional health compared with the control group.