

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

IS YOGA FOR YOU?

Considering it's thousands of years old, it might seem silly to say that yoga has come a long way in recent years. But as mind/body exercise continues to take hold in the '90s, the practice of yoga has moved from the alternative to the mainstream.

Today's hectic lifestyle has left many of us wondering how to manage the stress that comes along with it. While regular aerobic exercise and strength training can help, it isn't the complete answer. Some believe yoga is the piece you need to complete the puzzle of keeping both the body and the mind fit.

A TREND WORTH FOLLOWING

Now, before you start conjuring up images of zoned-out new-agers in pretzel-like positions chanting mantras, consider this: Yoga is an ancient practice that can help you deal with the stress of modern life. And, more and more people, stressed out or not, are discovering the benefits of yoga. In fact, it has been reported that more than six million Americans are now practicing some form of yoga.

Yoga, which means to yoke or unite, is the practice of uniting all aspects of a person — body, mind and spirit — through physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation. Flexibility, strength and muscle tone improve quickly as the mind and body work together in harmony and unison.

CHOOSE YOUR YOGA

There are several different branches of yoga, each with its own unique focus. Hatha yoga, the most widely practiced form, emphasizes concentration and consists of gentle stretching and

strengthening exercises. Because prana, or life force, is thought to originate in the breath, Pranayama yoga uses breathing exercises and breath control to enhance vitality and energy. Mantra yoga uses the concentrated repetition of a word or phrase to aid in the control of the mind.



A TIME TO RELAX

For some, yoga is a primary means of relaxation, something that is often difficult to achieve in the high-stress, high-speed world we live in. Regardless of which type you choose, yoga is an excellent way to stretch and strengthen the body, focus the mind and relax the spirit. In fact, most modern stress-reduction techniques are based on the principles of yoga. Dr. Dean Ornish, in his work with heart patients, utilizes yoga exercises, breathing and relaxation techniques to reverse symptoms of heart disease. Current research indicates that stress-related diseases respond favorably to this type of approach.

EASING INTO IT

The best way to get started in yoga is to find a class that appeals to you. Find out where yoga classes are being held in your area and stop by to see how you like it. There are many different approaches to yoga — some focus on breathing, others focus on holding specific postures — and it's important to find the one that appeals to you the most.

A YOGA WORKOUT

One type of yoga that has recently jumped in popularity is astanga, or power yoga. This type involves a series of very intense yoga postures done in succession. This class, which is a vigorous workout, can help develop strength as well as flexibility.

Yoga is a great way not only to relax, but also to improve your performance in other activities. Once you have learned a few yoga moves and breathing techniques, they can easily be integrated into your regular fitness routine. So don't let any preconceived notions of yoga keep you from enjoying the benefits of this dynamic mind/body exercise.

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M MONMOUTH
FITNESS CLUB

165 E. Main Street
Monmouth, OR 97361
503-838-2951

www.monmouthfit.com

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