



Inner Fire Yoga

Bountiful Benefits

Yoga does a body (and mind and spirit) good

By Amanda N. Wegner
Photography by Adam Senatori

For more than 5,000 years people have been practicing something that's only been in our country's collective conscious for a few decades: yoga. And with nearly 11 million Americans reaping the benefits of this practice, it's got to be good.

And it is. From increased strength and flexibility to less stress, the benefits of yoga are bountiful. "It is a beautiful blessing to reap the mental, emotional and physical benefits of yoga," says Aubree Saia, owner of Jewel in the Lotus, which offers an array of yoga classes.

Reaping the rewards

Madison's Jennifer Mitchell has always loved to exercise. About two years ago she "just decided" to try yoga. She now has a daily practice, attending two or three classes a week and practicing at home on other days.

Part of Jennifer's dedication comes from the many gains she's realized through her regular practice. "I'm more flexible. My posture is better; I sit tall and don't slouch. I have greater body awareness as well as strength from holding poses," she says.

Then there are the mental benefits: "Whereas I would have blown up over something in the past, I've learned to take a break, a step back. Yoga has helped me view life differently. It's just amazing

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what it does for the mind and body.”

Find your practice

People come to yoga for all sorts of reasons, from physical fitness to spiritual realization. “All are valid,” says Aubree. “Most people come to yoga for one reason or another and find they receive much more. The practice infinitely showers us with gifts and blessings.”

There is some trial and error in yoga. With literally hundreds of styles of yoga, part of the practice is finding a style and place that works for you. Marit Sathrum, owner of Inner Fire Yoga Center, where all classes are held in a heated room, offers easy advice. “Go to the yoga studio closest to you and experiment. Try a few classes, not just one, different styles, different teachers. And don’t give up. If you don’t find what you’re looking for at the first place, try the next closest location.”

Still not sold on yoga?

“Don’t knock it until you try it,” says Aubree. “Really, the magic of yoga cannot be understood through the mind. It can only be understood through experience. It’s fun, inspiring, refreshing and healthy.”

“It is an incredible experience with so many benefits,” adds Marit. “It’s something everyone has to, at the very least, try.” **mb**

The Benefits of Yoga

Ask 100 yoga students what they’ve gained from their yoga practice, and you’ll get 100 answers. While some benefits are researched and documented, many more are anecdotal. Here are some of the most well-documented benefits.

Flexibility

You’re never too old, tight or unfit for yoga, because one of its greatest benefits is increased flexibility. In yoga, holding poses, or asanas, limbers the joints to improve range of motion, as well as opens the tendons, ligaments and other soft tissue.

Strength

While some vigorous styles of yoga, such as vinyasa or flow yoga, are designed, in part, to improve strength and muscle tone, many less strenuous poses and yoga styles build muscular strength and endurance as well, especially if held for a period of time. For instance, Downward-Facing Dog is excellent for building upper-body strength, and Chair Pose is great for the low back and legs.

Posture

Good posture is a function of body

awareness and increased flexibility and strength, especially in the low back and abdominals. Yoga helps with all this.

Breathing

Breathwork, or pranayama, is an integral part of yoga. Whether it’s practicing specific breathing techniques during class or the deep and sustained breathing that comes from holding a long pose, this encourages full, healthy breathing and can help some people improve their lung capacity.

Less stress

Some breathing techniques can also encourage relaxation, calming the stress-inducing fight-or-flight response. Meditation, which calms the mind, may also be incorporated into classes. Yoga also works at the biochemical level to reduce stress; decreased levels of stress hormones and hormone neurotransmitters create a feeling of calm, while an increase in the hormone oxytocin engenders a sense of relaxation and connectedness.

Mental

Researchers are beginning to explore the connection between yoga and the mind, but ask any yoga student and they’ll tell you they usually leave class feeling happy and better able to focus. While it could be the increased oxygen to the brain, the concentration required to hold Tree Pose or being part of a supportive community, yoga is great for the mind and body.

Other benefits

Yoga can lower blood pressure and slow your heart rate, which is great for people with cardiac issues. It can also decrease cholesterol and triglyceride levels, boost immune function, alleviate the symptoms of chronic conditions and much more.

