

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF HATHA YOGA

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Hatha Yoga currently has become almost a fad, with innumerable variations and styles, with millions of people participating. What are the best parts? What precautions are needed?

Yoga in its origins as a whole has many branches: Raja Yoga, a path of self-discipline and ethics, Bhakti Yoga, a path of devotion and worship, Jnana Yoga, a path of knowledge and wisdom, Nada Yoga, sounds and music, Karma Yoga, doing service without expecting reward or recognition, Japa Yoga, repeating a mantra, and it has many other smaller branches.

Hatha Yoga is a specific part of Raja Yoga, a discipline that was designed for purifying, strengthening, energizing, and relaxing the physical body, bringing harmony and balance to the various organs and systems of the body. Hatha is what is taught widely, known as “Yoga.” Hatha can yield also many less physical, less tangible effects, such as meditation, peacefulness, joy, love, compassion, focus, attention, energy, stamina, stress management, courage, organizational and management skills, leadership, vision, purpose, intention, etc.

The purpose of this article is to show mainly some of the physical, emotional, and mental health benefits of Hatha Yoga.

Some important caveats are necessary before beginning this discipline. For safety and for best results, it is important to have good instruction, preferably in a class.

Hatha is not a competition or a standard of athletic perfection. Many classes are available that turn it into an athletic event. Athletics are great for good health, but this should not be called Yoga.

Each participant should have his or her own flexible intention for how much to exert or to stretch and for how long at each session. Attention needs to be paid to this personal approach to know how much to do. This keeps changing with time, attended to by one’s intuition and awareness of body sensations. With each person, “listening” to one’s own body, Hatha is adaptable to anyone, regardless of size, strength, flexibility, etc. Many severely disabled bodies can benefit from some modified poses. Sometimes just lying in the relaxing pose and watching others during the whole class can even be beneficial. Visualizing one’s own body doing the poses can also be effective. Yoga therapy classes and individual sessions are available, adapted to specific physical limitations.

For beginners especially, but for everyone, safety should be the first consideration. Thousands of people go to the emergency departments of hospitals each year with Yoga related injuries such as fractures, dislocations, strained muscles, tendon and ligament sprains or tears, joint and nerve injury, etc., and worsening of preexisting defects.

So it is vital to pay heed to the instructor's precautions about contraindications for certain poses when a person has certain health conditions or limitations. Especially take care with balancing poses and inverted ones. If pain occurs in a joint, tendon or ligament, or a burning type of pain, or an electrical shock feeling, stop doing what you are doing or modify the pose with the help of the instructor. Discomfort in the muscles is normal, but if you start to perspire profusely or turn blue in the face, or show any signs or symptoms of overdoing it, stop and re-adjust.

In the beginning, it is best to go half as far into the pose as you think you can. Our culture is so competitive, that it is almost everyone's tendency to "excel," to go beyond what is recommended, to get an "A+" in everything, to be at the top of the class, or to feel inferior if others are doing the pose "better."

It is important to realize that to be "advanced" in Hatha Yoga does not mean doing more difficult poses. Advanced means using the practice more as a meditation, to pay keener attention to body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and energy, and to use the practice more and more for experiencing a peaceful state.

Since Yoga originated in India where Hinduism and Buddhism are common, some fundamentalist or orthodox Christians are concerned that doing Hatha Yoga can lead them astray toward non-Christian religions. Actually the main spiritual benefits of peacefulness and appreciating silence are common to all major religions, including Christianity and Judaism.

Many Hatha Yoga classes are taught in a Christian style, with quotations of Bible verses during the poses. When I taught Hatha classes in Louisa for many years, I included Bible verses and Judeo Christian messages in the instructions of the poses, as well as some sayings from other traditions, keeping the quotations rather generic in application, compatible with any faith. This aspect needs to be recognized, because if a class is truly Yoga, and not just a physical exercise, it definitely has benefits as a spiritual practice.

Many classes begin with a minute or so of chanting, which helps to raise the enthusiasm and connectedness of the group and to set a peaceful atmosphere. It can be relaxing, invigorating, empowering, and harmonizing. Chanting and singing also encourage deep, rhythmic breathing, reduce stress hormones, and support immune function. Many books have been written about the healing power of sound and music.

My presentation about the specific health issues improved by Hatha Yoga is based largely on Nirmala Heriza's book, Dr. Yoga.

Back in the 1990's, when no medical treatment was ever shown to reverse atherosclerotic coronary disease, the cardiologist Dean Ornish, who had been practicing Yoga since medical school, made a shocking demonstration that a lifestyle program could reverse this disease process. He designed a controlled study with the participants practicing Hatha Yoga, Yogic breathing practices, meditation, physical exercises,

visualization, a vegetarian diet, and a support group called “Opening The Heart,” for awareness and expression of feelings. His experimental group showed shrinking of the obstructions in the coronary arteries, and improved cardiovascular function, without the addition of prescription drugs. The control group got worse. His Lifestyle Heart Study was published in the British Journal Lancet, and his program design continues to be successful today, with many hospital cardiac rehabilitation programs adopting this program, with Medicare approval.

Dr. Ornish has pioneered a similar program to reverse prostate cancer, with great success using the same methods as with the heart study.

I have practiced Yoga since the 1990’s since I discovered Dean Ornish’s program. I had had extra abnormal (but benign) heartbeats that were distracting. After my first Raja Yoga weekend at Yogaville, VA, the abnormal beats disappeared. When I slacked off on my practice, they reappeared, only to vanish again when I resumed my practices. That introduced me to the beneficial effects and reminded me to continue.

Dr. Yoga, by Nirmala Heriza, explains Yoga’s many health benefits, including applications to many systems in the body, including musculo-skeletal, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, endocrine, and nervous systems, describing restorative programs for each system. Some of the benefits are backed up with controlled trials, but most are descriptions of case studies and the explanations of improved function in several systems of the body. The various poses are described in detail, demonstrated with pictures. Including the pictures is not logistically practical in this article, but the classic Hatha poses currently are pictorially available from many sources.

Regarding cardiovascular issues, one pose recommended is the head to knee pose or sitting forward bend, which increases parasympathetic tone to balance the sympathetic tone, and this increases flow to the coronary arteries.

The shoulder stand, with legs elevated and weight on elbows and shoulders, or only with legs up the wall or elevated on a chair, also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, can be beneficial in coronary artery disease and cardiomyopathy. The deep relaxation, supine on the floor, also lowers blood pressure and relaxes the whole body. Deep breathing also balances the parasympathetic nervous system, likewise alternate nostril breathing balances the nervous system to benefit the heart.

The reason it is so important to balance the sympathetic with the parasympathetic nervous system is because most people in our society are in “sympathetic overdrive,” spending more time in “fight or flight” mode than in “rest and digest.” This leads to a whole host of dysfunctions in digestive, nervous, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems, and in many stress - related conditions.

One example given in the cardiovascular area is that of Gary Bart, a film producer. He was referred by his cardiologist at the Cedars Sinai Medical Center to the Hatha Yoga class in the Preventive and Rehabilitative Cardiac Center. He had cardiomyopathy

(weakened heart muscle), which caused general weakness and fatigue. He had shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, and difficulty performing his usual activities. He attended class regularly two times per week and did poses on his own between classes. He started with very gentle poses, and within 2 months he was able to do the regular poses along with the rest of the class. He then had increased energy and stamina, returning to normal lifestyle, with improved blood pressure and heart rate. At the writing of this book he continued Hatha Yoga and was fully functional in his profession and in the rest of his life. He said he was more centered and better able to handle a lot of situations that “used to baffle me, or cause a great deal of stress.” He said now he knew “I could handle whatever stress came my way.”

Dr. Mehmet Oz, cardiologist at Columbia University says, “Because of doing Yoga, I am not plagued by the orthopedic issues most surgeons face from being cramped over an operating table all day.” He suggests that every one of his patients do Yoga both before and after surgery. It helps to prevent lung problems and stiffness of the body that can occur after surgery. Yoga is one of the most used modalities for patients and doctors in the Columbia-Presbyterian Heart Institute.

One patient referred by Dr. Ornish to Ms. Heriza (the author of this book) had episodes of debilitating atrial fibrillation, and was fatigued and depressed. She started with deep relaxation and breathing practices, then gradually added other Hatha postures. Her episodes became fewer, her exercise tolerance increased, as well as general strength and stamina, and the alternate nostril breathing 3 times per day helped to stabilize the episodes of fibrillation. This practice had resulted in converting the abnormal rhythm to normal for the first time without electric shock, which had been needed several times previously. She had said before that, “I take life very seriously and am under a great deal of stress.” One of the great effects of Yoga on many health conditions is that it helps people handle stress better.

Another area of health to which Hatha is so applicable is the musculo-skeletal system. I personally have known many people with great improvement in musculo-skeletal conditions from yoga classes.

A client of Nirmala Heriza had severely painful plantar fasciitis with heel spurs and trouble walking. This was unresponsive to injections, and she was anticipating surgery. With Hatha Yoga and physical therapy, her feet became flexible and pain free, and she could resume her regular activities (without surgery).

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS), a very common condition, occurs when inflammation in the hand compresses the median nerve, causing pain and weakness in the thumb and fingers. Dr. W. Seurian published an article in The Lancet in 1999 showing that Yoga is effective in preventing and treating CTS. Also Dr. M.S. Garfinkel’s paper in JAMA in 1998 showed that yoga could reverse CTS.

Mukunda Stiles in his book Structural Yoga Therapy describes a large assortment of musculo-skeletal problems, including scoliosis, improved by specifically prescribed postures and practices for each condition.

The nervous system obviously benefits from the invigorating and relaxing effects of Hatha Yoga. Dr. U. Panjawani published a controlled study in the Indian Journal of Medical Research showing reduction of 86% in chronic seizures after 6 months of Yoga. The NYU Comprehensive Epilepsy Center, the largest epilepsy program in the Eastern U.S.A, provides Yoga therapy. Dr. Stephen Pacia studies the use of yoga to reduce seizure frequency, to reduce anxiety and depression, and to rehabilitate and to improve the quality of life.

Joe, a professional actor, continued to have seizures while on medication and was about to give up his professional activities, and after several months of Hatha Yoga, had a major decrease in the frequency of seizures and was able to continue to go on stage and to put together a cabaret.

Daily practice with alternate-nostril breathing calms and stabilizes the mind in bipolar disorder, and some patients, with close medical supervision, have been able to come off medications.

The respiratory system can have great improvement through Hatha postures, especially the Cobra pose, which strengthens back muscles, gives flexibility to the spine, and expands the chest. It also promotes circulation to the lungs and heart. This is lying face down, stretching the head and neck forward and upward. The Fish pose extends the chest backward while lying on the back, and increases circulation to lungs and heart. JAMA reported that the Fish pose is a clinically recognized effective treatment for asthma and bronchitis.

The rapid abdominal breathing removes phlegm and invigorates blood circulation, also improving bronchial conditions.

The Mayo Clinic has given Yoga its strong endorsement for treating and preventing a variety of acute and chronic disease, including asthma. Dr. David Kearney, O.M.D. (Dr of Oriental Medicine) at Emperor's College, Santa Monica, CA, states that asthmatics improve by conditioning the body toward "slow, nasal, deep, rhythmic breathing, exemplified in Hatha Yoga, rhythmic breath become a very physiologic habit."

The gastrointestinal system is especially amenable to assistance with Hatha Yoga, especially since this system requires smooth functioning of the parasympathetic nervous system. The cobra, the head-to-knee pose, the shoulder stand, spinal twist, deep breathing, rapid abdominal breathing, and alternate nostril breathing, all help the digestive and elimination processes.

Nirmala Heriza describes a film producer, actor, and writer who had been hospitalized because of irritable bowel syndrome, with intake limited to liquids, experiencing

bloating, cramping, and diarrhea with food. Starting with deep relaxation and breathing practices and progressing to forward bending poses, she fully regained her health and only occasionally experienced exacerbations when her Yoga practices lapsed.

Guided visualization and meditation were prominent aspects of Dr. Dean Ornish's program described in his book, Program For Reversing heart Disease. Dr. Sandra McLanahan, working intimately with the program, describing the visualization of the coronary arteries being clear and open, and flowing freely, reported that the person with the most dramatic improvement was a plumber.

In my experience both as a participant and as a teacher, I have known many people who have benefited greatly from the practice of Hatha Yoga in improving their lives altogether.