How Yoga Can Benefit YOU!

For thousands of years, yoga has shown countless times that it can provide incredible benefits to one’s fitness regime and life. Western medicine has never recognized it as a healing source but some practice is finally becoming recognized. Below are some ways that yoga can benefit your personal health:

1. Improves your flexibility

Improved flexibility is one of the first and most obvious benefits of yoga. During your first class, you probably won’t be able to touch your toes, never mind do a backbend. But if you stick with it, you’ll notice a gradual loosening, and eventually, seemingly impossible poses will become possible. You’ll also probably notice that aches and pains start to disappear. That’s no coincidence. Tight hips can strain the knee joint due to improper alignment of the thigh and shinbones. Tight hamstrings can lead to a flattening of the lumbar spine, which can cause back pain. And inflexibility in muscles and connective tissue, such as fascia and ligaments, can cause poor posture.

2. Perfects your posture

Your head is like a bowling ball—big, round, and heavy. When it’s balanced directly over an erect spine, it takes much less work for your neck and back muscles to support it. Move it several inches forward, however, and you start to strain those muscles. Hold up that forward-leaning bowling ball for eight or 12 hours a day and it’s no wonder you’re tired. And fatigue might not be your only problem. Poor posture can cause back, neck, and other muscle and joint problems. As you slump, your body may compensate by flattening the normal inward curves in your neck and lower back. This can cause pain and degenerative arthritis of the spine.

3. Prevents cartilage and joint breakdown

Each time you practice yoga, you take your joints through their full range of motion. This can help prevent degenerative arthritis or mitigate disability by “squeezing and soaking” areas of cartilage that normally aren’t used. Joint cartilage is like a sponge; it receives fresh nutrients only when its fluid is squeezed out and a new supply can be soaked up. Without proper sustenance, neglected areas of cartilage can eventually wear out, exposing the underlying bone like worn-out brake pads.

4. Drains your lymphs and boosts immunity

When you contract and stretch muscles, move organs around, and come in and out of yoga postures, you increase the drainage of lymph (a viscous fluid rich in immune cells). This helps the lymphatic system fight infection, destroy cancerous cells, and dispose of the toxic waste products of cellular functioning.

5. Relaxes your system

Yoga encourages you to relax, slow your breath, and focus on the present, shifting the balance from the sympathetic nervous system (or the fight-or-flight response) to the parasympathetic nervous system. The latter is calming and restorative; it lowers breathing and heart rates, decreases blood pressure, and increases blood flow to the intestines and reproductive organs.

6. Improves your balance

Regularly practicing yoga increases proprioception and improves balance. People with bad posture or dysfunctional movement patterns usually have poor proprioception, which has been linked to knee problems and back pain. Better balance could mean fewer falls.

7. Gives you peace of mind

Yoga quells the fluctuations of the mind. In other words, it slows down the mental loops of frustration, regret, anger, fear, and desire that can cause stress. And since stress is implicated in so many health problems—from migraines and insomnia to lupus, MS, eczema, high blood pressure, and heart attacks—if you learn to quiet your mind, you’ll be likely to live longer and healthier.

8. Supports your connective tissue

As you read all the ways yoga improves your health, you probably noticed a lot of overlap. That’s because they’re intensely interwoven. Change your posture and you change the way you breathe. Change your breathing and you change your nervous system. This is one of the great lessons of yoga: Everything is connected—your hipbone to your anklebone, you to your community, your community to the world. This holistic system simultaneously taps into many mechanisms that have additive and even multiplicative effects. This synergy may be the most important way of all that yoga heals.

***Do you have a question about health, fitness or nutrition? Send it to Ask Laura, at*** [futurist@shockertrackclub.com](mailto:futurist@shockertrackclub.com)

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