

Wellness Articles

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Yoga 101

Yoga has become increasingly popular, with studios popping up in nearly every neighbourhood, offering a variety of styles and classes – all promising better health, increased strength, balance and flexibility.

More and more, health practitioners and fitness experts are recognizing the benefits of regular yoga practice and are recommending it as a beneficial, low impact, form of exercise for people at every stage of life. Studios offer classes for everyone from toddlers to seniors –those recovering from injury to professional athletes.

For someone unfamiliar with yoga, reading a class schedule can be confusing, with terms mostly in Sanskrit and class descriptions also often using unfamiliar terms and language.

The following simple guide should provide you with enough information to get started.

Asana - a yoga posture. The original asanas were created to improve meditation by preparing the body to sit for extended periods of time. Over time, asanas have evolved to include postures that benefit the entire body. They can be broken into the following groups: Standing postures, seated postures, balancing postures, supine postures, inversions and twists.

Hatha Yoga– In a hatha yoga class, traditional postures (asanas) are taught with a focus on alignment. Postures are held to improve strength and endurance. Beginner Hatha classes are a great place to start for total newbies to yoga.

Vinyasa or Vinyasa Flow Yoga: These classes add flowing movement to transition through sequences of traditional yoga postures with a strong focus on breath. They are active classes, typically beginning with a series of sun salutations, and most often include standing, balancing, seated and supine postures. Vinyasa classes can be modified for any level of practice. Flow practices are often modified to target specific areas of the body, like core strength, hip openers, spine stabilizing, etc.

Sun Salutation: As the name suggests, these posture sequences were developed as morning or evening exercises to warm up the spine, preparing for the day ahead or a good night's rest. They are strongly aligned with breath and involve stretching the body, bending and weight bearing. The Sanskrit name for these sequences is "Surya Namaskara".

Ashtanga Yoga: Founded by Pattabhi Jois, Ashtanga Yoga is a vigorous, demanding practice that incorporates numerous vinyasas and sequences of asana with a focus on mastering the breath and the postures. In classical Ashtanga yoga, the student practices the Primary Series and does not progress to the next level of practice until mastery has been achieved.

Hot Yoga: Hot yoga is practiced in very hot, humid rooms with temperatures usually between 36 and 42 degrees centigrade. There are numerous schools of hot yoga that practice specific routines, Bikram Yoga being one of the most recognizable. Before you practice hot yoga, ensure you are well hydrated. This form of yoga is not recommended for those with high blood pressure or pregnant women. Be prepared to perspire! Bring a water bottle and a yoga towel.

Yin Yoga: Most yoga involves active (yang) movement or effort. Yin yoga is more passive (yin) with postures being held for three to five minutes. The goal is to gently stretch the connective tissues and fascia rather than strengthen and stretch muscle. Yin yoga is suitable for all levels of practice.

Restorative Yoga: Even more gentle than Yin yoga, restorative yoga focuses on nurturing and restoring the body through gentle, passive stretches, typically held for 3-5 minutes, or longer. Modifications to postures, bolsters, blankets and blocks are offered and suggested to ensure comfort is maintained throughout the class.

There are many other schools, styles and variations of yoga. If you have questions about a class or a program, call ahead to the studio you are thinking of visiting and speak with an instructor and they'll help you find the best option for you. Before you begin any new physical activity, check with your doctor to ensure the exercise is appropriate for your level of fitness.