HEALTH BASICS

Yoga

Yoga is a practice combining physical postures, breathing, and focused attention.

WHAT IT IS
A practice combining movement, postures, breathing, and focused attention

WHERE IT COMES UP
Exercise classes, rehabilitation, stress management, and home routines

WHY IT MATTERS
May support balance, mobility, strength, relaxation, and pain management

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Physiotherapy or an appropriately trained yoga service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No single test or measurement

Overview

Yoga is a group of practices that developed in India. Modern forms often combine physical postures, controlled breathing, relaxation, and meditation. Some classes are mainly physical, while others focus more on breathing, attention, or philosophy.

Yoga is not a disease, diagnosis, or medical treatment by itself. It is a form of activity that some people use for exercise, relaxation, symptom management, or personal and spiritual practice.

Styles differ greatly. A gentle chair-based session and a fast, heated class may both be called yoga, even though they place very different demands on the body. Class names such as "beginner," "restorative," or "advanced" are not standardized. Ask what a session involves rather than relying only on its name.

You do not need to be flexible to begin. Postures can often be adjusted by using a chair, wall, strap, cushion, or block. Yoga should not require you to force a joint into a painful position.

How it works

Yoga can affect health through several connected parts of the practice.

Postures move joints and ask muscles to hold or change position. Depending on the style, this may support flexibility, balance, coordination, and muscular endurance. Some postures are physically demanding, but many yoga sessions do not provide enough sustained activity to count as aerobic exercise.

Breathing and focused attention may help reduce physical tension and change how you respond to stress. Slow breathing can influence the autonomic nervous system, which manages automatic functions such as heart rate and digestion. This does not mean that breathing exercises treat every condition linked with stress.

Regular practice may also improve confidence with movement. For someone who has avoided activity because of pain or fear of falling, a suitable class may offer a structured way to move gradually. The setting, teacher, routine, and contact with other people may contribute as well.

No single biological mechanism explains all reported effects of yoga. Results differ according to the type of yoga, how often it is practised, the teacher's approach, and the health outcome being measured.

Why it matters for your health

Research suggests that yoga may provide modest benefits for some people with chronic, non-specific low back pain. "Non-specific" means that the pain is not linked to one clearly identified cause, such as a fracture or infection. Yoga is one possible management option, not a guaranteed solution.

Yoga may also support balance, general fitness, wellbeing, and sleep for some people. Research into stress, anxiety, and other mental health outcomes has produced encouraging results, but studies often use different yoga programs and methods. Yoga should not replace mental health care when professional support is needed.

The physical intensity matters. Gentle yoga may improve mobility without substantially raising your heart rate. More active forms may contribute to weekly physical activity, but yoga alone may not cover aerobic, strength, and other exercise needs.

Yoga can be used alongside medical care, physiotherapy, or rehabilitation when the practice is appropriate for your situation. It should not be used to delay assessment of new, unexplained, or worsening symptoms. Claims that yoga can cure serious illnesses, "detox" the body, or replace prescribed treatment are not supported by good evidence.

What can go wrong

Most yoga-related problems involve muscles, tendons, ligaments, or joints. Examples include muscle strains, ligament sprains, irritated tendons, and worsening of existing neck, back, knee, wrist, or shoulder pain. Falls can happen during balance postures.

Risk may be higher when a posture is forced, repeated despite pain, or attempted without suitable support. Rapid progress, competitive teaching, physical adjustments without consent, and fatigue can also contribute.

Certain situations need extra planning:

These situations do not always rule out yoga. A clinician familiar with your condition or a physiotherapist can help identify useful modifications.

Stop the activity and arrange routine clinical follow-up if pain repeatedly returns, an old condition becomes harder to manage, or you are unsure which movements are appropriate.

Seek prompt medical advice for severe or persistent pain after an injury, marked swelling, new weakness or numbness, or eye pain and vision changes after a head-down posture.

Call emergency services for chest pressure, severe trouble breathing, fainting with ongoing symptoms, signs of a stroke, or a serious head, neck, or back injury. These are emergency symptoms regardless of whether they happen during yoga.

- Osteoporosis or previous fractures: Strong spinal bending, twisting, or force may not be suitable
- Glaucoma or some retinal conditions: Head-down positions can temporarily raise pressure inside the eye
- Pregnancy: Practice may need modification as balance, joints, and body position change; heated yoga is generally avoided
- Recent surgery or joint replacement: Movement restrictions may apply during recovery
- Heart, lung, or neurological conditions: Exercise intensity and balance demands may need adjustment
- Heated classes: Heat and sweating can contribute to dehydration, dizziness, or heat illness

What you can do

Before joining a class, ask about its pace, room temperature, balance demands, and use of hands-on adjustments. Tell the instructor about relevant injuries or movement limits. You can decline physical adjustments at any time.

Look for an instructor with training suited to the class and your needs. If you have a health

condition, ask whether the instructor has experience adapting yoga for it. An instructor can teach movement, but should not diagnose illness or tell you to stop prescribed treatment.

Practical steps include:

If you are healthy, comfortable with ordinary physical activity, and choosing a gentle beginner session, there may be nothing medical you need to check first.

- Start with a level and style that match your current ability
- Use supports and modifications rather than forcing a posture
- Move within a comfortable range and stop for sharp or increasing pain
- Keep a record of movements that help or aggravate symptoms
- Ask a physiotherapist which positions to modify after injury or surgery
- Ask an eye clinician about inversions if you have glaucoma or retinal disease
- Discuss pregnancy-specific changes with your maternity care service

Common questions

Does yoga count as exercise?

It can. Active classes may build strength, balance, and flexibility and may raise your heart rate. Gentle or meditation-focused sessions may involve little aerobic activity. What counts depends on the actual movements and intensity, not the class label.

Should yoga hurt?

A posture may feel effortful or produce a mild stretching sensation. Sharp pain, increasing joint pain, numbness, or tingling are reasons to stop. Pain is not proof that a posture is effective.

Can yoga treat back pain?

Yoga may modestly improve pain or function for some people with chronic, non-specific low back pain. It is not appropriate for every cause of back pain. New pain after trauma, pain with weakness or numbness, or pain with bladder or bowel changes needs medical assessment.

Is hot yoga better than ordinary yoga?

There is no clear basis for assuming that heat makes yoga more effective. Heated rooms add physical stress and can cause dizziness, dehydration, or heat illness. They are not suitable for everyone.

Do I need special equipment?

Usually not. A non-slip surface and comfortable clothing may be enough. Chairs, walls, blocks,

straps, and cushions can make positions more stable or accessible.

Can yoga replace other treatment?

Not usually. Yoga may complement care, but it should not replace prescribed medicine, rehabilitation, psychotherapy, or assessment of concerning symptoms without discussion with the relevant clinician.

Sources

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Yoga: Effectiveness and Safety .
- Wieland LS, et al. Yoga for chronic non-specific low back pain . Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2022;11:CD010671.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult Activity: An Overview .
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Exercise During Pregnancy .
- Jasien JV, et al. Intraocular Pressure Rise in Subjects with and without Glaucoma during Four Common Yoga Positions . PLOS ONE. 2015;10(12):e0144505.
- Pascoe MC, Thompson DR, Ski CF. Yoga, mindfulness-based stress reduction and stress-related physiological measures: A meta-analysis . Psychoneuroendocrinology. 2017;86:152-168.