FITNESS & EXERCISE

Yoga Helps, but It Cannot Do Everything

Yoga can support flexibility, balance, strength and some health conditions, but the evidence draws clear limits around what it can replace or promise.

The promise gets stretched

You unroll a mat hoping yoga will loosen your shoulders, settle your mind and perhaps count as the exercise you keep meaning to do. By the end of class, the claims may have stretched further than you did: better posture, stronger muscles, less pain, relief from depression and a complete fitness routine in one.

Some of that promise has evidence behind it. Yoga is a form of physical activity, and regular practice can help your joints move more easily and improve posture. General physical-activity guidance also says yoga may improve balance, muscle strength and flexibility. Those are useful gains, especially if yoga is an activity you enjoy enough to continue.

But "useful" is not the same as "complete," and yoga is not one fixed activity. The evidence supplied here does not establish that every style, class or pose produces the same effects. It also does not show that feeling calmer or looser after a class proves a disease has been treated.

The fairest way to judge yoga is to separate the things it is well suited to do from the jobs it may not cover. That leaves a less miraculous story, but a more practical one: yoga can occupy a valuable place in an active life without having to carry the whole thing.

Movement is the reliable part

At its simplest, yoga gets you moving. Physical activity is any movement that works your muscles and requires more energy than resting, and even modest amounts can be good for health. A yoga practice therefore counts as activity without needing to qualify as a cure or transformation.

Its clearest role is in flexibility. Flexibility activities stretch muscles, help the body stay limber and allow joints to move more easily. Yoga is also commonly used for balance, and general guidance says it may improve balance and muscle strength as well as flexibility. For older adults, those abilities sit alongside endurance and strength as distinct parts of physical fitness.

This distinction matters. Aerobic activity increases breathing and heart rate, while resistance

exercise uses weights, bands or body weight to build stronger muscles. Balance and flexibility are different categories again. Most people benefit from combining these kinds of activity rather than expecting one favourite form to perform every job.

A demanding yoga class may involve body weight and feel strenuous, but the sources do not establish that yoga alone supplies all the aerobic and strengthening activity a person needs. The honest claim is narrower: it can contribute movement, flexibility, balance and some muscle work. Whether it covers another fitness category depends on what you actually do, not what the class is called.

Regularity matters more than novelty. Your body adapts to the activity you practise, and building up slowly helps you improve without pushing too hard at once. Enjoyment matters too, because an activity you like is easier to make part of ordinary life.

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Depression deserves the careful answer

The strongest condition-specific case in these sources concerns depression. A 2024 systematic review and network meta-analysis included 218 studies and 14,170 participants with major depression. Compared with active controls such as usual care or a placebo tablet, yoga was associated with a moderate reduction in depression. Walking or jogging and strength training were also beneficial.

That is meaningful evidence, but its limits belong in the same paragraph. Only one study in the entire review met the criteria for low risk of bias. Confidence was rated very low for most treatments, including yoga, even though the results appeared robust to publication bias. Participants and staff also generally knew which intervention they were receiving, leaving room for expectations to influence results.

Other large reviews support exercise for depression more broadly. A 2023 analysis of 41 trials found large effects favouring aerobic and resistance exercise, although many studies were small and methods varied considerably. A 2025 review likewise found benefits from aerobic exercise, resistance exercise or a mixture of the two for symptoms of depression and anxiety. Neither finding turns yoga specifically into a proven anxiety treatment.

Yoga can therefore be considered alongside established care for depression, not presented as a guaranteed substitute for it. The 2024 review concluded that exercise forms including yoga could sit alongside psychotherapy and antidepressants as core options. "Alongside" is the important word. Depression is a medical condition, and changing or replacing care belongs in a conversation with your health professional.

The evidence does not support telling everyone that yoga will lift their mood, nor does it identify a particular yoga approach that will do so. It supports a more restrained possibility: for some people with depression, yoga may be a tolerable form of exercise that contributes to treatment.

Pain relief is not a blank cheque

Chronic neck pain offers another useful test of yoga's reputation. A 2024 review of reviews examined 25 systematic reviews covering 17,321 participants, although overlap between participants was not accounted for. Yoga and several other exercise types showed positive short-term effects on pain compared with no exercise. Yoga also showed positive effects on disability.

That does not make yoga the best exercise for a sore neck. When different exercise types were compared, results for pain and disability were conflicting, and no large differences emerged. The researchers could not recommend one optimal form of exercise. For yoga specifically, there were no long-term results.

The quality of the included reviews ranged widely, from critically low to high. So the evidence supports trying exercise, including yoga, as one possible approach to chronic neck pain; it does not support claims that yoga corrects every painful neck, addresses an underlying cause or outperforms other movement.

Pain also marks the point where persistence stops being admirable. If exercise causes pain, extreme shortness of breath, dizziness or simply makes you feel wrong, stop and seek help. Check with a health professional before starting if you have trouble moving or balancing, worry that exercise may be unsafe, or have a health problem that could affect which activities suit you.

Pregnancy deserves the same individual approach. A 2022 systematic review found that exercise during pregnancy was not associated with increased maternal or perinatal adverse outcomes and was linked with several benefits. But the type and intensity should reflect previous fitness, medical history and the pregnancy itself. Those findings concern exercise generally; they do not prove every yoga pose or class is suitable.

On Monday, make yoga one piece

Start with a smaller assignment than "get fit through yoga." On Monday, clear enough floor space to move without obstruction and put down an exercise mat. Choose a

beginner-appropriate practice that matches your present ability, then notice what it actually asks of you: stretching, balancing, supporting your body weight or sustained movement.

Begin slowly rather than trying to match someone else's range or difficulty. Regular practice supports improvement, while increasing activity gradually helps you avoid pushing too hard all at once. If balance or mobility is already difficult, ask a health professional what kind of activity is appropriate before you begin.

Then look at what yoga leaves uncovered. If your practice is mainly stretching and balance, it does not automatically stand in for activity that raises your breathing and heart rate or for resistance work aimed across the major muscle groups. A broadly useful routine combines aerobic, strengthening, balance and flexibility activity.

Yoga does not need to cure depression, eliminate pain or replace every other exercise to earn its space in your week. Let it do the jobs the evidence supports, and use the mat as a starting place rather than a promise.

Where this comes from

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