



what is yoga?

Yoga is an ancient Hindu practice traditionally used to attain spiritual well-being. The word yoga stands for “union,” reflecting its purpose to create harmony between the mind, body, and spirit. Nowadays, yoga is also viewed as nontraditional exercise or even as an alternative medicine. It comes in different forms and ranges from gentle to rigorous activities, and can help in achieving physical, mental, and emotional fitness.

The different types of yoga offer their many health benefits in varying degrees and efficiency. Hatha yoga and gentle forms, in particular, have been shown in studies to play an important role in the prevention of cardiovascular disease and management of existing conditions. Hatha yoga encompasses a set of physical postures, or asanas, breathing exercises, and meditation.

Perhaps by now you are wondering how yoga affects heart health, so here is how it works:

Yoga encourages positive emotions and reduces stress. Yoga is traditionally integrated with meditation, which is one of its important components. Meditation facilitates relaxation and tranquility. When you do yoga, you release negative feelings such as anger, loneliness, and discontent. Yoga may also balance emotions and release stress. In that way, your body prevents

the build-up of plaque in the arteries, which can otherwise be caused by stress, thereby possibly reducing the risk of heart attacks and other cardiovascular problems. Yoga is also known for clearing the mind and generally improving mental well-being.

Yoga lowers blood pressure. As you do breathing exercises and meditate, you likely experience some serenity and calmness. This allows your body to rest and relax. The slowed breathing rate reduces blood pressure and regulates the heartbeat, and it yields a calming effect on the sympathetic nervous system responsible for producing stress hormones.

Yoga improves blood flow and exercises the muscles. Since yoga involves different physical postures and activities, it exercises a variety of muscles and enhances blood circulation. Regular practice of yoga not only tones your muscles, it can also keep your heart muscles strong. Likewise, improved blood flow controls blood sugar and cholesterol levels, which are risk factors for developing heart illnesses.

Yoga also can reduce inflammation, boost recovery from cardiac failure, diminish irregular heart rhythms, and lower some of the cardiovascular risk factors.

Certainly, yoga has so much good to offer that it is worth a try. However, if you are obese or if you have existing heart problems or diabetes, consult your doctor first. And remember, to reap the optimal benefits of yoga on heart health, do this activity in sync with a heart-friendly diet and a consistent exercise routine. •

SELECTED SOURCES “5 Ways Yoga Promotes Heart Health” by Elaine Gavalas, *Huffington Post*, 2/16/12 • “It’s No Stretch—Yoga May Benefit Heart Disease,” *Harvard Health Publications*, 5/11 • “What Is Yoga, Really?” Self Realization Fellowship, www.yogananda-srf.org, 2013 • “Yoga and Heart Health,” *American Heart Association*, 7/13

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