Yoga: Tap into the many health benefits

Chronic stress can lead to a variety of health and emotional problems. Yoga can be an effective method to reduce stress and anxiety. See how to get started.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Your kids are demanding the latest video game, your boss wants that report done yesterday, and your partner wants to know what's for dinner. Stress and anxiety are everywhere. If they're getting the best of you, you might want to make like a cobra or a mountain and try yoga.
Yoga's series of postures — some with names from nature — and controlled breathing exercises are a popular means of stress management and relaxation. Today, yoga classes teaching the art of breathing, meditation and posing are offered nearly everywhere — from trendy health clubs in big cities to community education classes in small towns to hospitals and clinics. If you're looking for more do-it-yourself techniques for stress reduction, see how to get started with yoga.

**Understanding yoga**

Yoga is considered a mind-body type of complementary and alternative medicine practice. Yoga brings together physical and mental disciplines to achieve peacefulness of body and mind, helping you relax and manage stress and anxiety. Traditional yoga philosophy requires that students adhere to this mission through behavior, diet and meditation. But if you're just looking for better stress management — whether because of life's daily hassles or a health problem you're facing — and not an entire lifestyle change or way of life, yoga can still help.

Yoga has many styles, forms and intensities. Hatha yoga, in particular, may be a good choice for stress management. Hatha is one of the most common styles of yoga, and some beginners find it easier to practice because of its slower pace and easier movements. But most people can benefit from any style of yoga — it's all about your personal preferences.

The core components of hatha yoga and most general yoga classes are:

- **Poses.** Yoga poses, also called postures, are a series of movements designed to increase strength and flexibility. Poses range from lying on the floor while completely relaxed to difficult postures that may have you stretching your physical limits.

- **Breathing.** Controlling your breathing is an important part of yoga. In yoga, breath signifies your vital energy. Yoga teaches that controlling your breathing can help you control your body and quiet your mind.

**The health benefits of yoga**

The potential health benefits of yoga are numerous and may include:
• **Stress reduction.** With its quiet, precise movements, yoga draws your focus away from your busy, chaotic day and toward calm as you move your body through poses that require balance and concentration.

• **Increased fitness.** As you learn and refine new poses, you may enjoy improved balance, flexibility, range of motion and strength. And this means you're less likely to injure yourself in other physical endeavors or in your daily activities.

• **Management of chronic health conditions.** Yoga might help with a variety of health conditions, such as cancer, depression, pain, anxiety and insomnia, by helping with sleep problems, fatigue and mood. Yoga also can help reduce heart rate and blood pressure.

• **Weight loss.** If you're overweight or have binge-eating disorder, yoga may help you make the healthy lifestyle changes necessary to gain control of your eating and drop those extra pounds.

While you shouldn't expect yoga to cure you or offer 100 percent relief, it can help some health conditions when combined with standard treatment. And if you already enjoy good health, yoga can be an enjoyable supplement to your regular fitness routine.

**Taking precautions before starting yoga**

Yoga is generally considered safe for people of all abilities, even if you use a wheelchair or you're severely overweight. But there are some situations in which yoga might pose a risk. You may need to find an alternative to yoga or scale back your yoga poses.

See your health care provider before you begin yoga if you have any of the following conditions or situations, since complications can arise:

• Balance problems
• Uncontrolled high blood pressure
• Certain eye conditions, including glaucoma
• Severe osteoporosis
• Pregnancy

• Artificial joints

You may be able to practice yoga in these situations if you take certain precautions, such as avoiding certain poses or stretches. Regardless of your health status, start slowly and gently. If you develop symptoms or concerns, see your doctor to make sure you're getting benefit and not harm from yoga.

**Finding a yoga class**

If you've decided to try yoga, whether for stress management or other health benefits, look for classes in your area. Although you can learn yoga from books and videos, beginners usually find it helpful to learn with an instructor. Classes also offer camaraderie and friendship, which are also important to overall well-being.

When you find a class that sounds interesting, talk with the instructor so that you know what to expect. Questions to ask include:

• What are the instructor's qualifications? Where did he or she learn yoga, and how long has he or she been teaching?

• Does the instructor have experience working with students with your needs or health concerns? If you have a sore knee or an aching shoulder, can the instructor help you find poses that won't aggravate your condition?

• Is the class suitable for beginners? Will it be easy enough to follow along if it's your first time? Can you observe a class before signing up?

• What is the focus of the class? Is it aimed at your needs, such as stress management or relaxation, or is it geared for people who want to reap other benefits?

• What do you need to take along to class? Some classes require you to bring a mat or towel to sit or stand on while doing poses. Other classes will provide a mat.

Remember, regardless of which type of yoga you practice, you don't have to do every pose your instructor demonstrates. If a pose is uncomfortable or you can't hold it as long as the instructor requests, don't do it. Good
instructors will understand and encourage you not to exceed your personal limits. Spend time sitting quietly, breathing deeply until your instructor moves the class on to another pose that's more comfortable for you.

At the end of a yoga session, you should feel invigorated, yet relaxed and calm. If this isn't the case, talk to your instructor. He or she might have suggestions for you. Otherwise there may be another yoga class better suited to your needs for stress management and relaxation.

References