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Yoga

Are you looking for a workout program that's easy to learn, requires little or no equipment, and soothes your soul while toning your body? If strengthening your cardiovascular system, toning and stretching your muscles, and improving your mental fitness are on your to-do list, keep reading to learn more about the basics of yoga.

What Is Yoga?

Although it seems like a hot new trend, yoga actually began more than 3,000 years ago in India. The word yoga comes from Sanskrit, and it means to "yoke," or bring together the mind, body, and spirit.

Although yoga includes exercise, it is also a lifestyle for which exercise is just one component. Disciplining your mind and body as well as connecting with your spirituality are the main goals of the yoga lifestyle.

The physical component of the yoga lifestyle is called hatha yoga. Hatha yoga focuses on asanas, or poses. A person who practices yoga goes through a series of specific poses while controlling his or her breathing. Some types of yoga also involve meditation and chanting.

There are many different types of hatha yoga, including:

- * Ashtanga yoga: Ashtanga yoga is a vigorous, fast-paced yoga that helps to build flexibility, strength, concentration, and stamina. When doing Ashtanga yoga, a person moves quickly through a set of predetermined poses while remaining focused on deep breathing.

- * Power yoga: Similar to Ashtanga yoga, this is also a very active form of yoga that improves flexibility and stamina by completing poses. This type of yoga is popular in the United States.

- * Bikram yoga: Bikram yoga is also known as "Hot Yoga." It is practiced in rooms that may be heated to

more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius).

- * Gentle yoga: Gentle yoga focuses on slow stretches, flexibility, and deep breathing.

- * Kundalini yoga: Kundalini yoga uses poses, deep breathing and other breathing techniques, chanting, and meditation.

- * Iyengar yoga: This type of yoga focuses on precise poses. and participants use benches, ropes, mats, blocks, and chairs.

Yoga has tons of benefits. It can improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. In addition to the physical benefits, many people who practice yoga say that it reduces anxiety and stress and improves mental clarity.

You have lots of choices when it comes to tailoring your yoga workout. Many fitness centers and YMCAs offer yoga classes, and many yoga instructors also offer private classes that can be purchased per class or in groups of classes.

Before taking a class, take the time to observe the class that interests you and check whether the instructor is registered with the Yoga Alliance, a certification that requires at least 200 hours of training in yoga techniques and teaching.

You may also want to try a yoga video - there are many excellent videos just for beginners. Instructional websites, CD-ROMs, and books are also available to help you learn more about yoga.

Before you head to your first yoga workout, you should dress comfortably. Snug-fitting shorts or tights and a T-shirt or tank top are best. Yoga is practiced barefoot, so you don't have to worry about special shoes.

If you're doing your yoga workout on a carpeted floor, you probably don't need any equipment, but many people who practice yoga or take yoga classes like to use a sticky mat. This type of mat provides cushioning and friction while you are doing your poses and can be purchased in sporting goods stores or often at the yoga class location.

What can you expect at a yoga class or when you watch a yoga video? To begin the class, the instructor may lead you through a series of poses called vinyasa. The Sun Salutation is a type of vinyasa in which 12 poses are performed in a graceful, flowing motion.

Before You Begin

Before you begin any type of exercise program, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor, especially if you have a health problem. Also, be sure to mention any orthopedic problems or special needs you may have to your instructor before the class begins.

Fortunately, yoga can be as vigorous or as gentle as you want it to be, so just about everyone can do it. A good instructor will be able to provide modified poses for students who are just beginning, advanced, or who have special needs.

Your schedule's already packed - so how are you supposed to fit in time to work out? Here are a few tips for fitting in fitness and staying motivated:

- * Break it down. If you can't do a half hour of yoga in one sitting, try doing it in chunks. How about 15 minutes after you get up and 15 minutes before bed? Or try three 10-minute workouts to break up a long study session.

- * Do what works for you. Some people have more success working out in the morning before the day's activities sidetrack them; others find that a nighttime workout is the perfect way to unwind before hitting the sack. Experiment with working out at different times of the day and find the time that fits your schedule and energy level best.

- * Find a workout buddy. Doing your yoga routines with a friend is a great way to remain motivated. If you have an appointment with a friend to work out, you'll be less likely to cancel. You and your buddy can compare tips on healthy eating and exercise habits, evaluate each other's poses for form, and keep each other on track.

- * Consistency is key. If you want to reap the benefits that yoga provides, you'll have to do it consistently. A once-a-month yoga workout may relieve some stress, but for benefits like increased flexibility and stamina, you should aim to practice yoga three or four times a week. It generally takes about 4 to 6 weeks of regular exercise at least 3 days

a week for your body to begin to release the endorphins that make exercise such an uplifting experience.

* Set some goals. The same routine every week may become monotonous, so set some goals to help you stay focused. Perhaps you'd like to incorporate power yoga into your routine so you get a better cardiovascular workout. Maybe you've always done workout tapes at home and your goal is to sign up for a yoga class with an instructor. Whatever you choose as your goal, make sure you reward yourself when you accomplish it!

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