**What Else Can Yoga Do?**

Yoga reduces stress. When you are stressed, your body kicks into “fight-or-flight” mode. More technically, it triggers the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). If you were being chased, this would help you get away. Too often, though, other stressors trigger the SNS. Yoga activates the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which lowers blood pressure and heart rate and increases blood flow to your digestive organs. You can think of the PNS in terms of “rest and digest” or as initiating relaxation.

As you hold a pose and breathe, you can relax more deeply and intensify the stretch. For example, in child’s pose, a kneeling pose with your forehead to the ground, you can feel a lengthening of your spine as you breathe.

Yoga activates body awareness. If you are in your head a lot and not leading an active lifestyle, you may feel disconnected from your body.

**5 Reasons to Try Yoga Now**

By Sarah C. Lange, RYT

In North America, yoga has become hugely popular. You can take classes at studios or fitness centers almost anywhere. Yoga is so big it has reached even small towns.

But just because yoga pants are fashionable doesn’t mean that everybody quite knows what yoga is or what to make of it. Is it a religion? Is it merely exercise? Why should you try it? Will it help you lose weight or maintain your weight?

What Is Yoga?

First, what yoga isn’t: It is not a religion. People of all faiths practice yoga for its physical and mental benefits. It is also not just exercise. Yoga is a practice that focuses on your breath and movement.

The word “yoga” means “union.” Yoga not only joins breath and movement but also unites the body, mind and spirit. By focusing on your body and breath, you can calm your mind, allowing unhelpful thoughts and feelings to fall away. In other words, yoga can help you find peace and a sense of inner harmony.
and all it helps you do every day. It’s OK. You’re not the only one! Practicing yoga brings you back into your body. You once again experience the world through the five senses. You learn to stay present, to focus on the moment—not the past or the future.

You also learn to accept your body as it is on a given day. Maybe it’s tight or sore, or maybe you feel strong and energized. Reconnecting with your body is essential if you want to lose weight or maintain a loss.

**Yoga builds strength.** While yoga is generally not a great cardio workout, it is an excellent strength workout. Yoga works your muscles differently from strength training with weights, which isolates muscles. Instead, yoga uses your body weight and targets multiple muscle groups in a given pose.

Practicing yoga also helps you develop strong core muscles, or the muscles of your trunk, which protect and stabilize your spine. A healthy spine is strong and flexible, and keeping your spine mobile can mean less stiffness and pain as you age.

**Yoga increases flexibility.** Some people shy away from yoga thinking that they aren’t flexible enough. While it’s true that some folks of all shapes and sizes are naturally flexible, practicing yoga can help you become more flexible. Good range of motion in the pelvis and shoulders, resulting from increased flexibility, makes everyday tasks, like tying your shoes, easier. Everyone can benefit from this, but moving with ease is especially important as you get older.

**Yoga improves balance.** As you age, you can help prevent falls and any resulting injuries and broken bones by staying active and working on your balance. Poses, such as stork pose (see the following photos), can help you practice balance. And because of the mind-body connection, focusing on your balance in a pose also can ease your mind.

Consider giving yoga a try. For mind-body wellness, it’s a relatively simple way to increase your activity and reduce anxiety, with the added benefit of helping your weight-loss and maintenance efforts.

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**Poised for Balance**

Practicing this short series of standing poses can help you develop strength, stability and balance—important skills to have when learning how best to avoid falls.

**Mountain Pose**

Stand with your feet below your hips, shoulders relaxed and away from your ears. Feel your feet firmly grounded and keep a slight bend in the knees as you lengthen your spine, allowing the crown of your head to reach skyward.

Hold for 3–5 full breaths. Inhale and exhale slowly.

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*Photos by Christi Bring, Tops Staff*
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**Stork Pose**

**A.** Start in Mountain Pose. Begin to shift your weight onto one foot, keeping a slight bend in that knee.

**B.** Then bend the opposite knee and lift that foot off the ground so that your quadriceps, or the front muscles of your leg, are roughly parallel to the floor, or as far as is comfortable.

Hold for 3–5 full breaths. Inhale and exhale slowly. Return your foot to the ground, and repeat on the other side.

If you are still developing your balance, lift only your heel off the ground and keep your toes touching the ground.

You can also rest your opposite hand against a wall or on the back of a sturdy chair for more support.

**MAKE IT EASIER**

**Chair Pose**

Begin in Mountain Pose. Lift your arms overhead and bend your knees as if you were going to sit in a chair. Keep your weight in your heels and your shoulders relaxed.

Hold for 3–5 full breaths. Inhale and exhale slowly.

If you are still working on developing strength in your core, or the muscles of your trunk, rest your hands lightly on the back of a sturdy chair.