



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

Issue no: 52

March 2012

YOGA THERAPY

HOW YOGA KEEPS YOU FIT AND HEALTHY

If you're already a passionate yoga practitioner, you've probably noticed the benefits of a yoga practice. If you're still not sure how yoga works to improve your health, help heal aches and pains and keep sickness at bay, here are some explanations why yoga keeps you fit and healthy. I will give you more reasons in next month's newsletter, as there are just too many to include here.

1. **Improved flexibility** is one of the first and most obvious benefits of yoga. If you continue practising yoga, you'll notice a gradual loosening of the body as your muscles stretch and lengthen. Aches and pains start to disappear. Tight hips can strain the knee joint so we work on opening the hips. Tight hamstrings can lead to a flattening of the lumbar spine, which can cause back pain so we stretch the hamstrings.
2. **Strength** – strong muscles do more than look good. They also protect us from conditions like arthritis and back pain, and help prevent falls in elderly people. When you build strength through yoga, you balance it with flexibility. If you just went to the gym and lifted weights, you might build strength at the expense of flexibility.
3. **Standing correctly** – your head is like a bowling ball – big, round and heavy. When it's balanced directly over an erect spine, it takes much less work for your neck and back muscles to support it. Move it several centimetres forward, however, and you start to strain those muscles. Poor posture can cause back, neck and other muscle and joint problems. As you slump, your body may compensate by flattening the normal inward curves in your neck and lower back. This can cause pain and degenerative arthritis of the spine. Yoga helps to create good posture.
4. **Joints** – each time you practice yoga, you take your joints through their full range of motion. This can help prevent degenerative arthritis by “squeezing and soaking” areas of cartilage that normally aren't used. Joint cartilage is like a sponge; it receives fresh nutrients only when its fluid is squeezed out and a new supply can be soaked up. Without proper sustenance, neglected areas of cartilage can eventually wear out, exposing the underlying bone like worn-out brake pads.
5. **Spinal disks** – the shock absorbers between the vertebrae that can herniate and compress nerves – crave movement. That's the only way they get their nutrients. If you've got a well-balanced yoga practice with plenty of backbends, forward bends and twists, you'll help keep your disks supple.
6. **Bones** – it is well documented that weight-bearing exercise strengthens bones and helps ward off osteoporosis. Many postures in yoga require that you lift your own weight. Some, like Downward Dog and Upward Dog, help strengthen the arm bones, which are particularly vulnerable to osteoporotic fractures. A study conducted at California State University, showed that yoga practice increased bone density in the vertebrae. Yoga's ability to lower levels of the stress hormone **cortisol** may help keep calcium in the bones.
7. **Cortisol** – yoga lowers cortisol levels. Excessive cortisol has been linked with major depression, osteoporosis (it extracts calcium and other minerals from bones and interferes with the laying down of new bone), high blood pressure, and insulin resistance. High cortisol leads to over-eating. The body then takes those extra calories and distributes them as fat in the abdomen, contributing to weight gain and the risk of diabetes and heart attack.

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HOW YOGA KEEPS YOU FIT AND HEALTH (continued)

8. **Circulation** – yoga gets your blood flowing resulting in more oxygen to your cells, which function better as a result. Twisting postures squeeze out venous blood from internal organs and allow oxygenated blood to flow in once the twist is released. Inverted postures such as Headstand, Shoulderstand and Legs Up The Wall, encourage venous blood from the legs and pelvis to flow back to the heart, where it can be pumped to the lungs to be freshly oxygenated. This can help if you have swelling in your legs from heart or kidney problems. Yoga also boosts levels of haemoglobin and red blood cells, which carry oxygen to the tissues. It thins the blood by making platelets less sticky and by cutting the level of clot-promoting proteins in the blood. This can lead to a decrease in heart attacks and strokes since blood clots are often the cause of these killers.
9. **Lymph drainage** – when you contract and stretch muscles, move organs around, and come in and out of yoga postures, you increase the drainage of lymph (a viscous fluid rich in immune cells). This helps the lymphatic system fight infection, destroy cancerous cells, and dispose of the toxic waste products of cellular functioning.
10. **Heart rate** – increasing your heart rate can lower your risk of heart attack and can relieve depression. You don't need to do vigorous yoga to boost your heart rate. Postures such as Locust and The Bow noticeably increase your heart rate. But even yoga postures that don't increase your heart rate can still improve cardiovascular conditioning. Studies have found that yoga practice lowers the resting heart rate; increases endurance and can improve your maximum uptake of oxygen during exercise – all reflections of improved aerobic conditioning.
11. **High blood pressure** – if you've got high blood pressure, you might benefit from yoga. Two studies of people with high blood pressure, published in the British Medical Journal *The Lancet*, compared the effects of Savasana with simply lying on a couch. After three months, Savasana was associated with a 26-point drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) and a 15-point drop in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number) – and the higher the initial blood pressure, the bigger the drop.
12. **Feel happy** – a regular yoga practice can improve depression and significantly increase serotonin. It can decrease the levels of monoamine oxidase (an enzyme that breaks down neurotransmitters) and cortisol. It has been found that people who meditate have greater levels of happiness and better immune function.
13. **Weight problems** – Eat less and move more. That's the key to losing weight. Yoga can help with both. A regular practice gets you moving and burns calories. Yoga may also inspire you to become a more conscious eater.
14. **Lowering blood sugar** – yoga lowers blood sugar and LDL (bad) cholesterol while boosting HDL (good) cholesterol. In people with diabetes, yoga has been found to lower blood sugar in several ways: by lowering cortisol and adrenaline levels, encouraging weight loss and improving sensitivity to the effects of insulin. Get your blood sugar levels down, and you decrease your risk of diabetic complications such as heart attack, kidney failure and blindness.
15. **Brain** – an important component of yoga is focusing on the present moment. Studies have found that regular yoga practice improves coordination, reaction time, memory and even IQ scores.
16. **Nerve centre** – yoga encourages you to relax, slow your breath, and focus on the present moment, shifting the balance from the sympathetic nervous system (the fight or flight response) to the parasympathetic nervous system. The latter is calming and restorative; it lowers breathing and heart rates, decreases blood pressure and increases blood flow to the intestines and reproductive organs.
17. **Balance** – regularly practising yoga increases your ability to feel what your body is doing and where it is in space. This is called proprioception and it improves balance. People with bad posture or dysfunctional movement patterns usually have poor proprioception, which has been linked to knee problems and back pain. Better balance could mean fewer falls. For the elderly, this translates into more independence and delayed admission to a nursing home or never entering one at all. For the rest of us, postures like Vrksasana (The Tree) can make us feel less wobbly on and off the mat.

I hope you enjoyed learning about the benefits of yoga. More next month.