

Om Your Way to Better Health

Yoga's benefits stretch beyond boosting flexibility. Researchers keep finding new reasons why everyone should hit the mat. *By Karen Asp*

Relieve Lower-Back Pain

Forget bed rest—today's docs often prescribe exercise, yoga included. Practicing yoga may ease back pain better than avoiding exercise, concluded a scientific review tallying results from over 1,000 men and women, all suffering from low-back pain for three-plus months. It may be better to do yoga than to skip your workout because of its relaxation, meditation and breathing elements. Most studies asked participants to attend a 60- to 90-minute class (typically Iyengar-style) once or twice a week and practice at home on nonclass days. Beginners should find a class designed to ease low-back pain so an experienced instructor can help you protect your back.

Bolster Your Bones

Less than 15 minutes of yoga a day may keep your bones strong, according to a study published in *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*. Over 200 individuals, mainly women averaging 68 years old, did 12 minutes of yoga daily (or at least every other day) for two years. They held 12 poses (including tree and twisted triangle) for 30 seconds each. The result: improved bone density. In fact, the progress surpassed bone-building results typically seen with osteoporosis-countering drugs. Why? Using your muscles makes your bones stronger. Since yoga uses several muscle groups at once, you're exerting force on the bone from multiple angles, possibly enhancing the bone-building process.

Help Your Heart

Move over, cardio. Researchers evaluated almost 40 trials and found that yoga came with numerous heart-friendly benefits: lowering LDL ("bad") cholesterol and triglycerides, increasing HDL ("good") cholesterol and improving body weight, blood pressure and heart rate. Yet how does this stack up against aerobic activity like jogging? Surprisingly high. "Yoga achieved similar improvements to aerobic exercise," says Myriam Hunink, M.D., Ph.D., study co-author from the Netherlands. The study points to several factors about yoga that may be responsible for these changes, including the strengthening, stretching, breathing, meditation and relaxation aspects.

