

WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

An Introduction to Yoga for Whole Health



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

An Introduction to Yoga for Whole Health

SUMMARY

1. One of the main goals of yoga is to help people find a more balanced and peaceful state of mind and body.
2. The goal of yoga therapy (also called therapeutic yoga) is to adapt yoga for people who may have a variety of health conditions or needs.
3. Yoga can help improve flexibility, strength, and balance. Research shows it may help with the following:
 - Decrease pain in osteoarthritis
 - Improve balance in the elderly
 - Control blood sugar in type 2 diabetes
 - Improve risk factors for heart disease, including blood pressure
 - Decrease fatigue in patients with cancer and cancer survivors
 - Decrease menopausal hot flashes
 - Lose weight(See the complete handout for references.)
4. Yoga is a mind-body activity that may help people to feel more calm and relaxed. Research shows that yoga can help depression and anxiety.
5. Yoga helps calm and quiet the mind and body so that you can sleep better.
6. Many people find that yoga increases their self-awareness. This can help their own spiritual growth, whatever that may be.
7. By helping manage stress, yoga can help our relationships. A research study even showed how yoga can improve well-being at work.
8. Yoga is not a religion. In general, people of all religious faiths, as well as people who are not religious, can practice and benefit from yoga.
9. Yoga practices can be adapted for people of all abilities.
10. There are many different styles of yoga. It is important to choose the right style of yoga for your needs.

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best possible way to promote your health and happiness.**

An Introduction to Yoga for Whole Health

What is yoga?

When you see photos or videos of people doing yoga, it may not be obvious that yoga has been practiced for thousands of years. Yoga first began in India. It has changed over time, and a wide range of styles of yoga now exists. It can be hard to know where to start. As we will discuss later, some yoga styles may be a better fit for you than others. The good thing about the many styles is that most people can find something that works well for them.

The word “yoga” comes from the ancient language of Sanskrit. “Yoga” literally means “union” or “integration.” The purpose of yoga is to unite the body, mind, and spirit. This leads to harmony, balance, and peace within oneself and with others.¹ The word “yoga” also refers to the practices that help you get to this state of greater calm and peace. These practices work in part by increasing self-awareness. You may be most familiar with the physical postures, which are called asanas. That’s because they are the part of yoga practiced most often in the United States (U.S.) and they are easy to show in photos. However, these postures are just one part of the entire system of yoga. Yoga also includes breathing and meditation practices. It can include teachings on philosophy and nutrition as well. The main idea of all of these parts of yoga is to help people find a more balanced and peaceful state of mind and body.

Today, yoga’s popularity is growing because people find it brings them a greater sense of harmony, balance, and peace. Celebrities, professional sports teams, people in prison, and people recovering from addiction are among those benefitting from yoga.

What is yoga therapy?

Yoga has been used as part of traditional medicine in India for hundreds of years. Doctors have traditionally prescribed yoga to aid in healing.

Yoga therapy, also called therapeutic yoga, is a fairly new field in the United States and it continues to evolve. Yoga therapy is geared toward healing. It often adapts traditional yoga for people who may have a variety of health conditions or needs. Yoga therapy is often done one-on-one and sometimes in smaller classes.

How can yoga benefit my health?

The various parts of yoga, including the postures, meditation, and breathing, offer a wide range of benefits related to the Circle of Health.

- **Moving the Body**

The physical part of yoga—the postures—gets the most attention in the news and in research. Like other forms of exercise, doing the postures is helpful. Yoga helps improve flexibility, strength, and balance. When you do yoga, you pay attention to your body’s position and your breathing. This increases your self-awareness.

Research shows that yoga is helpful for low back pain.^{2,3} Research on yoga for other conditions is just getting started. So far, research shows that yoga is helpful for the following:

- Decrease pain in osteoarthritis⁴
- Improve balance in older adults⁵
- Control blood sugar in type 2 diabetes⁶
- Improve risk factors for heart disease, including blood pressure^{7,8}
- Decrease fatigue in patients with cancer and cancer survivors⁹⁻¹¹
- Decrease menopausal hot flashes¹²⁻¹⁵
- Lose weight¹⁶

- **Power of the Mind**

Yoga is a true mind-body activity. The physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation in yoga help to bring the mind and body together. This leads to the relaxation response. This is the opposite of the stress response.^{17,18} Another name for the stress response is “fight or flight.” This means a high level of anxiety and tension. When people do yoga, they are often able to be more calm and relaxed rather than being in the fight-or-flight mode. Research on mental health conditions is still growing. So far, research suggests that yoga can help reduce depression and anxiety.^{2,4,18-23}

- **Recharge**

Yoga helps to decrease the stress response. And it increases the relaxation response. This helps to calm and quiet the mind and body, so that over time and with regular yoga practice, you can sleep better. There is growing research to show that yoga may help with sleep.^{4,24} There is one yoga technique called *yoga nidra*, or yoga sleep. It results in very deep relaxation and rest.²⁵ Not all yoga classes teach *yoga nidra*.

- **Personal Development and Spirit & Soul**

Since it began, yoga has included teachings and beliefs. For example, it includes teachings about peace. Ahimsa, or non-violence, is a well-known teaching. Even without learning these teachings, many people find that yoga increases their self-awareness. This may help personal spiritual growth, whatever that may be.

- **Family, Friends, & Coworkers**

When we are more calm and relaxed, we are better able to **respond** rather than **react** to stress in our lives. Of course, we often have to deal with major stress in our relationships with friends, family, and co-workers. By helping manage stress, yoga can help our relationships. A research study even showed how yoga can improve well-being at work.²⁶

- **Food & Drink**

Yoga practice increases self-awareness. When we are more self-aware, we can better sense when we are full, hungry, or whether we might eat for other reasons, such as feeling bored or stressed out. This is how yoga can help with weight

management.^{16,18} In addition to weight management, research also suggests that yoga can help people stop smoking.^{27,28}

Is yoga a religion?

Yoga is not a religion. In India, the practices of yoga were part of a spiritual path. The way yoga led to a peaceful state of mind and body was a big part of this. Chanting, or using a mantra, is a part of yoga that may seem more “religious.” Not all styles of yoga use chanting or mantras. When they are used, it is for the calming effect of the sound and not necessarily for a spiritual purpose. Sometimes mantras are translated into English words, such as “peace.” These words can be used to focus the attention in meditation and help calm the mind. People of all religious faiths, as well as people who are not religious, can practice and benefit from yoga.

The people doing yoga in magazine photos look nothing like me. How can I do yoga if I’m not young, beautiful, and flexible?

The good news is that anyone can do yoga! There are many options for classes and styles that are easy and gentle. You do not have to “twist into a pretzel” to benefit from yoga. Doing more acrobatic postures is not necessarily better. Yoga practices can be adapted for people of all abilities.

Why are there so many styles of yoga?

Yoga teachers from India began teaching in the U.S. in the mid-1900s. They each started their own school. Some of these schools of yoga are named after their founders. Many of these teachers had been students of Krishnamacharya. He is considered the father of modern yoga. He increased awareness of yoga in India in the early 1900s. American students of these Indian teachers then started developing their own styles of yoga.

How do I find the right style of yoga for me?

Different styles may emphasize certain parts of yoga. The following list describes some of the most common styles of yoga. Note that there are other styles not included on this list that may also be a good fit for you.

- **Hatha Yoga** – The term hatha yoga refers to yoga’s physical practices—the postures and breathing. However, in the United States today it usually means a general type of yoga class. These classes can vary depending on the instructor’s background.
- **Iyengar Yoga** – This is the style of yoga used in many research studies. It was developed by B.K.S. Iyengar. He was the brother-in-law of Krishnamacharya. He is also the author of the book, *Light on Yoga*. Iyengar yoga focuses on exact postures. It uses props, such as cushions and straps, to help each person do the posture. Iyengar yoga teaches only the postures to beginners. People learn breathing practices (*pranayama*) and meditation after they have more practice.
- **Viniyoga** – T.K.V. Desikachar, a student of Krishnamacharya, developed Viniyoga. Gary Kraftsow, an American, leads the Viniyoga Institute that carries on the teachings. Viniyoga is used in yoga therapy. It does not focus on ideal postures.

Instead, it adapts postures for each person's abilities and needs. People learn to coordinate their breath with the movements.

- **Bikram Yoga** – This style of yoga has been in the news a lot. This is in large part due to its outspoken founder, Bikram Choudhury. Choudhury tried to patent the 26 postures used in his classes. It is a very athletic and even competitive form of yoga. It is done in a room heated to 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Bikram has the highest rate of reported injuries.
- **Ashtanga Yoga** – This is an athletic form of yoga originally taught by its founder, K. Pattabhi Jois. It involves challenging postures done in a strict order. It focuses more on the physical aspects of yoga.
- **Power Yoga** – This style was developed by Beryl Bender Birch, an American. It is very similar to Ashtanga yoga in its strict order of postures. It focuses on yoga as a form of athletic training.
- **Vinyasa Flow** – Vinyasa flow refers to a variety of similar styles. One of these is Forrest Yoga, developed by Ana Forrest. Based on Ashtanga Yoga, “Flow Yoga” is an athletic form. It seamlessly connects one posture after another. This is often the type of yoga class offered in gyms or fitness clubs.
- **Sivananda Yoga** – This style was developed by Swami Vishnudevananda. He was a student of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. There are now many Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers around the world. It is a holistic approach to yoga. It includes twelve postures, the Sun Salutation, breathing exercises, relaxation, and mantra chanting.
- **Integral Yoga** – Integral yoga was founded by Swami Satchidananda. He was also a student of Swami Sivandanda. It is a holistic approach to yoga. Classes include chanting, postures, breathing exercises, deep relaxation, and meditation. Teachers often have an interest in yoga philosophy and spiritual development. This is the style of yoga used in Dr. Dean Ornish's research studies on reversing heart disease.
- **Kripalu Yoga** – Kripalu yoga was developed by Yogi Amrit Desai. The main center for this type of yoga is the Kripalu Center in Massachusetts. The first stage of Kripalu yoga focuses on posture and coordinating the breath with movement. The later stages include meditation and holding postures longer. The goal is meditation in motion.
- **Kundalini Yoga** – This yoga style was developed by the Sikh master Yogi Bhajan. The main idea is to awaken the serpent power at the base of the spine (kundalini). Repeated movements are coordinated with breath control, chanting, and meditation.

Yoga Journal has a website that describes different styles of yoga, including some not listed in this handout. <http://www.yogajournal.com/article/beginners/not-all-yoga-is-created-equal/>

How should I start doing yoga?

If you are new to yoga, it is important that you learn from a qualified teacher. Yoga is generally very safe. However, there is a risk of injury if not done correctly and with proper guidance. It is also important to choose the right style of yoga for your needs.

Which style of yoga would be best for me?

As you can see from the list above, there is a wide range of styles. And this is only a partial list! The type of class that would be a good fit for you depends on what you hope to get out of it. It is also important to find a class that matches your own physical ability. You may want to try a few different classes, or call the yoga studio to get more information, to find the best fit for you. Some teachers or organizations offer classes geared specifically for Veterans or Servicemembers.

- **If you are athletic, in good physical shape, and most interested in the physical side of yoga**, a style such as Ashtanga Yoga, Power Yoga, Vinyasa Flow, or Bikram Yoga may be a good fit for you. Bikram Yoga is unique in that it is practiced in a heated room. It is very regimented and even competitive.
- **If you have physical limitations**, then Viniyoga or Iyengar yoga may be an excellent fit for you. These styles focus on adapting the postures to each person's needs. If you have major limitations, then working one-on-one with a yoga therapist may be the most helpful.
- **If you are interested in a holistic, gentle yoga** that includes breathing, chanting, meditation, and deep relaxation, Integral Yoga or Sivananda Yoga may be a good fit. Kripalu Yoga can also be similar. Also, classes called "Gentle Hatha," "Yoga for Relaxation," or something similar could be a good fit.
- **If you have PTSD, anxiety, depression, and/or another mental health condition**, one of the holistic, gentle yoga types listed above may be a good place to start. If available in your area, a class specifically for your condition may be most appropriate, such as "Yoga for PTSD," or "trauma-sensitive yoga." (See the section "For more information" near the end of this handout.)

What should I look for in a yoga class or teacher?

If you are new to yoga, consider these points in choosing a yoga class:

- Look for a class labeled "beginner," "level 1," or something similar.
- Avoid mixed-levels classes, such as one labeled "level 1 & 2." These may move too quickly and teach postures that you may not be ready to do yet.
- Generally speaking, the smaller the class, the more likely the teacher will be able to help you learn and give individual guidance when needed. Look for a class with fewer than 16 students.

- You may want to try a few different classes to find the best fit for you.

When choosing a yoga teacher, consider the following:

- Credentialing and licensing of yoga teachers can vary. Consider a teacher who has completed a teacher-training certification program through one of the main styles of yoga. Many certified teachers will be registered with the Yoga Alliance. They will have the letters “RYT” after their name. Yoga therapists may be registered with the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT).
- No matter what certification a teacher has, word of mouth counts. Ask friends, health professionals, or therapists for recommendations.
- Be sure to tell the teacher if you have any limitations or medical conditions to be aware of. Ask if the teacher is able to show you how to modify the postures and attend to your needs.
- If you don’t like the class or teacher that you first go to, try another. Your experience may vary dramatically depending on the teacher and their style. Even if other people like the teacher, it is important to find the best fit for you.

Does the VA offer yoga classes?

- Some VA Medical Centers offer yoga classes for wellness. Sometimes there are yoga classes for conditions such as pain or PTSD. What classes are available varies depending on the VA Medical Center.
- The Integrative Health Coordinating Center in the VHA Office of Patient Centered Care & Cultural Transformation is working with other VHA staff across the country to find ways to offer more integrative health and wellbeing services, including yoga.

For you to consider:

- Are you interested in trying yoga (or doing it again if you have tried it in the past)?
- Which forms of yoga interest you?
- What questions do you have for your healthcare team or a yoga teacher before you start?
- Based on what you know about yoga’s benefits, how do you think it would benefit you?

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For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on working your body	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health	Website including videos and links to research studies	https://nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga
International Association of Yoga Therapists	Website including member/therapist provider search	http://www.iayt.org/?page=MemberSearch
Warriors at Ease	Offers training, certification, and resources that bring “the healing power of yoga and meditation to military communities around the world.”	http://warriorsatease.org
Yoga for Vets	A nonprofit organization dedicated to help war Veterans “cope with stress of combat through yoga instruction.”	http://www.yogaforvets.org
Yoga Warriors International	A large, multifaceted program offering evidence-based yoga and mindfulness practices “to alleviate symptoms of combat stress or post-traumatic stress disorder and increase the resilience of critical task performers.”	http://www.yogawarriors.com
Veterans Yoga Project	An educational and advocacy organization that offers retreats and training in mindful resilience/mindful yoga therapy	http://www.veteransyogaproject.org

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Exalted Warrior Foundation	An organization that offers an adaptive yoga program for wounded warriors in the active military, Veteran hospital facilities, and Veterans within communities around the country.	http://www.exaltedwarrior.com
Connected Warriors	An organization that offers free yoga classes for Veterans in a variety of settings in over 20 states.	http://connectedwarriors.org
iRest in the Military	A branch of the Integrative Restoration Institute's presentation of yoga-based practices in support of active-duty military and Veterans.	https://www.irest.us/projects/veterans
Consider taking a yoga class at a VA medical center or in your community. See the guide on type of yoga classes above.		

This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration by Jonathan Takahashi, MD, MPH. Dr. Takahashi is a certified yoga teacher in Integral Yoga and an Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a tool for clinicians, Yoga: Looking Beyond “the Mat”, written by Surya Pierce, MD, ABIHM, RYT. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

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5/29/2020