

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOGA

This ancient practice has powerful health and mood benefits, according to mounting science. Here is how to find the ideal type for you, prevent injury—and slip in a routine when you can't get to class

By Holly Pevzner



FINDING A YOGA CLASS USED TO be simple. You'd walk into your local gym, and there would be the class. Your choices were few because, well, there weren't that many people looking to get their *om* on: in 2001, 4.3 million Americans were hitting the yoga mat; by 2016, that number had jumped almost ninefold, to more than 36 million. Studios, gyms and rec centers now offer an estimated 800-plus styles to choose from, says Leigh Crews, a spokesperson with the American Council on Exercise. Some of this has to do with yoga's (well-deserved) reputation for being an excellent stress reliever. But a big part of yoga's popularity surge is that it's just plain good exercise. Virtually any type of yoga improves strength, flexibility and balance, explains John P. Porcari, the director of the clinical exercise physiology program at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. “The more intense styles can also help you shape up and trim down.”

Want to take full advantage of that powerful collection of benefits? Read on for everything you need to know, whether you are a first-timer or a regular looking to take your poses to a whole new level.

If you are JUST BEGINNING or want the best MIND-BODY COMBO, try HATHA

Poses are straightforward, and the pace is unhurried. “You do a pose, come out of it, then do another,” explains Mark Stephens, the author of *Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques*. “It’s an excellent style for beginners.” Props such as blocks and bolsters are often used to help you get the right alignment. But it’s not just about the body; your teacher will also encourage you to focus on breathing, relaxation and meditation (which may involve chanting). And all of this mindfulness has a real-world benefit: a study in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* found that women who practice hatha yoga once or twice a week recover from stress faster than those who don’t.

If you want to GET SLIM, try ASHTANGA or POWER YOGA

These two styles provide all the regular benefits of yoga with the fat-blasting bo-

nus of a killer cardio session. Both focus on flowing from one pose to the next without rest—making for a terrific calorie burn (about 500 per hour). “The practice is meant to generate heat in your body,” says Mandy Ingber, the yoga instructor behind Jennifer Aniston’s ageless body. So, yes, you will sweat. A lot.

In ashtanga, the more traditional of the two, you’ll begin with chanting and then follow a sequence of poses (“asanas”) that never changes. In a power-yoga class, the poses vary each time and there’s usually none of the spiritual aspect.

A large study in the journal *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* confirms that women get lean in these classes: practicing yoga of any kind at least once a week for four years or more staves off middle-age spread.

If you want to CHILL OUT, try YIN YOGA

Named for the calm half of yin-and-yang, this style requires you to move slowly into poses (most of them performed while seated or ly-

What About Hot Yoga?

In Bikram, a.k.a. “hot yoga,” you practice in a steamy 105° room. It isn’t for everyone. “The heat and postures—which are the same each time—build strength and get you into a deeper stretch,” says instructor Mandy Ingber. This is a good thing if you’re looking to blast calories (as many as 500 per hour) and get limber, but it’s uncomfortable if you’re heat-averse—and downright dangerous if you are pregnant or have heart issues.

Pain-Free Posing

AS MORE OF US TWIST INTO poses, injuries are on the rise: in a 2009 study, 39% of yoga teachers, yoga therapists and doctors reported seeing more injuries than before. And yoga-related visits to emergency rooms are also increasing. Here’s how to stay off the sidelines.

TAKE IT EASY

“A lot of yoga injuries are from trying too hard,” says yoga author Timothy McCall. Holding your breath, panting—they’re signs you’re pushing too far.

DON'T GO TO EXTREMES

Poses such as headstands can potentially put too much weight on your cervical spine, upping your risk of injury. “These should not be done by anyone who hasn’t had a lot of yoga experience,” cautions Mike McArdle, the New York yoga instructor behind Bethenny Frankel’s *Skinnygirl* Workout DVD.

STOP IF YOU FEEL PAIN

It’s OK to challenge your muscles, but “if you feel a sharp or electric-type pain, back off,” advises physician Sara Gottfried.



ing down) and then stay in them for up to five minutes to allow for a deeper stretch and time to just, well, be.

Not surprisingly, yin yoga is particularly good at activating the part of your nervous system that helps you bounce back from pain and stress, says Sara Gottfried, an integrative physician in Berkeley, Calif., and the author of the book *The Hormone Cure*. Expect meditative music and lots of attention to breathing,

as well as those centers of spiritual energy known as chakras—all elements that add to the serene allure of the practice.

If you're PRONE TO ACHES, try IYENGAR

As with many types of yoga, the poses you'll do in an Iyengar class are traditional. The difference is in how those poses are done. Iyengar teachers are trained in biomechanics, so they understand which positions are most

likely to cause injuries—and how to modify them by tweaking your form and showing you how to use props to make them less intense, says Stephens. Plus, pausing between poses (as opposed to flowing from one to the next) allows you to perfect your position, so you're less likely to strain something.

Iyengar may even help you recover from injury. A study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found that a similar style of yoga, Viniyoga, worked wonders on chronic lower-back pain in just 12 weeks.

FIND THE RIGHT CLASS

The truth is, you can discover a great instructor or class in a church basement, or a questionable one in a fancy yoga studio. Just keep in mind that your teacher should be properly

trained, with at least a 200-hour certification from Yoga Alliance, the main yoga education organization in the U.S. Below, the scoop on your options:

Yoga Studio

• The coaching:

Most require teachers to have Yoga Alliance certification. Some also require additional in-house training so that teachers can learn the studio's specific style.

• The classes:

Practice rooms are Zen-like, and class options abound. Studios that are part of national chains might offer lockers and showers.

• The crowd:

Morning classes tend to be smaller (10 to 20 people), but postwork classes can be packed.

Flex in Five



TRIANGLE

Stretches hamstrings and muscles; supports the spine; boosts mobility in shoulders

- Stand with feet five feet apart; turn left foot out, right foot slightly in. Inhale; raise arms parallel to floor. Exhale; hinge at left hip; rotate so that left torso comes down over left leg; rest left hand on lower leg and reach right hand straight up from shoulder. Hold; return to start; repeat on other side.

WIDE-LEG STANDING TWIST

Stretches hamstrings; increases spine flexibility; improves mobility in shoulders

- Stand with feet a bit closer, feet parallel. With spine long, exhale; fold forward from hips; bring hands to floor; hold. Inhale, twist torso left; reach left hand straight up; hold. Exhale; return to center; inhale; repeat on right. Exhale; return to center; inhale; return to standing.

LOCUST

Increases spine flexibility; strengthens back muscles; opens shoulders; stimulates central nervous system

- Lie facedown with forehead on floor, legs straight, arms by sides, palms up. Inhale, lifting head, upper body, arms and legs off floor; stretch legs and arms back, keeping gaze on floor. Hold and then slowly lower back down.

FOLDED FORWARD BEND

Calms nervous system; stretches hamstrings and back muscles

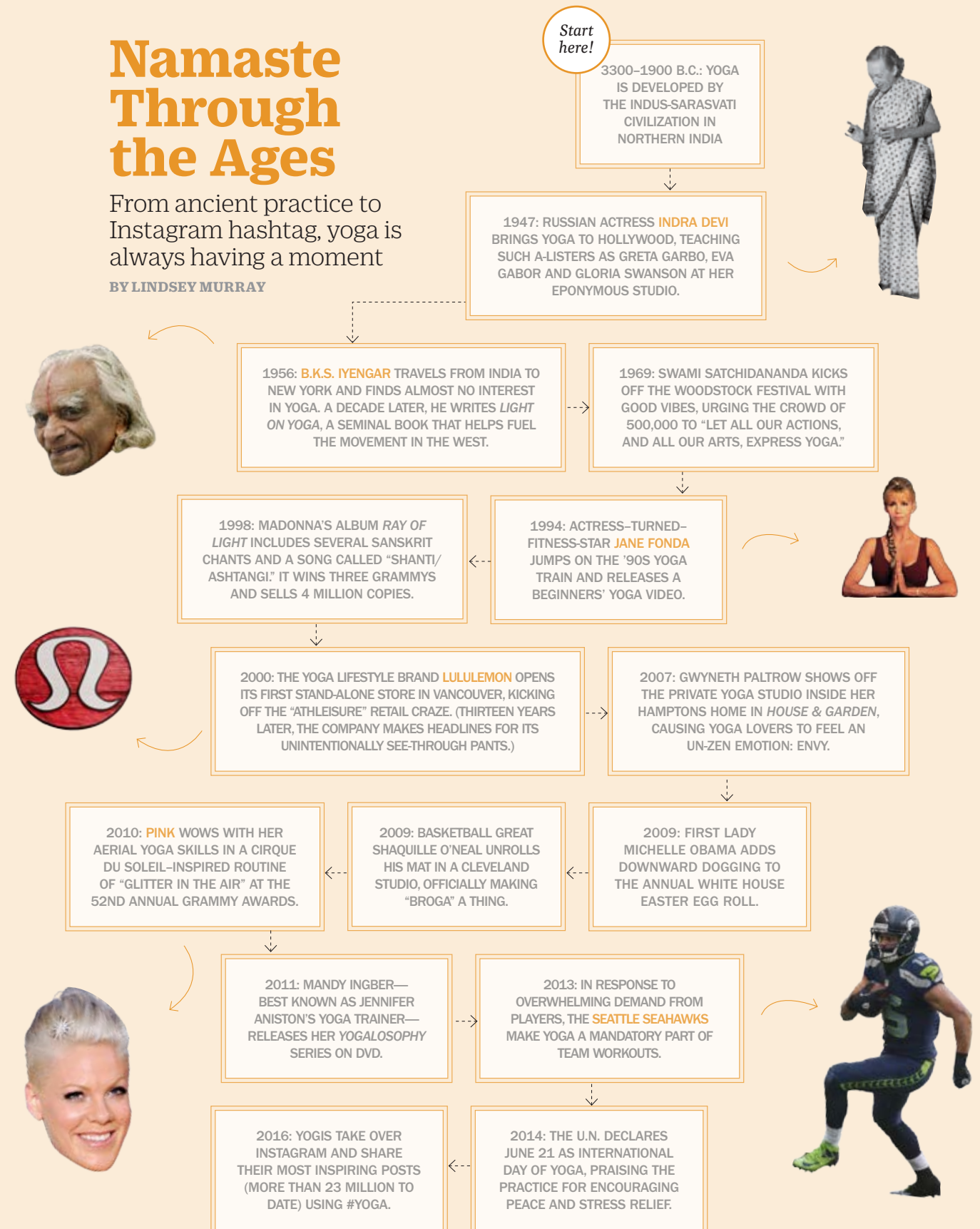
- Sit on the edge of a folded blanket, legs straight and together in front of you, arms by sides. Keeping spine long, exhale and fold forward over legs, stretching arms forward to hold sides of feet or calves; hold and then inhale and slowly lift back up to sitting.

Treat your body to this stretch-you-all-over mini-routine from yoga instructor and DVD star Seane Corn, who teaches around the world. Hold each pose for three to eight breaths

Namaste Through the Ages

From ancient practice to Instagram hashtag, yoga is always having a moment

BY LINDSEY MURRAY



“In big classes, there’s usually additional help from yoga instructors who are being mentored by the main teacher,” says Kay Kay Clivio, the head of teacher training at Pure Yoga.

• **The cost:**
\$12 to \$20 per class; \$100 to \$190 per month for unlimited classes. Ask about free trial classes.

The Gym

• **The coaching:**
Teachers are usually certified by Yoga Alliance, but since many gyms don’t pay well, you may end up with a teacher who’s certified but less experienced, says Timothy McCall, the author of *Yoga as Medicine*.

• **The classes:**
Most gyms provide props and a variety of classes, including yoga hybrids (though the benefits of pure yoga often get lost); the atmosphere is less serene than a studio’s. Then again, you get to hit the steam room after class.

• **The crowd:**
After-work classes average 25 to 40 people—

usually without additional teaching help—and classmates may be less serious about yoga.

• **The cost:**
Usually free with gym membership.

The Rec Center

• **The coaching:**
Teachers sometimes have group-fitness (as opposed to yoga-specific) certification, which is not ideal.

• **The classes:**
Usually just a few styles; BYO props.

• **The crowd:**
Classes tend to be crowded.

• **The cost:**
Many charge by the class, others by the year. Discounts are often available for residents.

In the end, what matters is that you’re comfortable in the class. If your first one isn’t a good fit, try a different style, a different teacher or both. And once you find that perfect combination, stick with it, says McCall: “You’ll get the most benefits from yoga if you’re a regular.”

The One Essential

Your own mat, to avoid picking up germs from the shared ones. No need to spring for anything fancy. Just look for one that’s grippy so that you don’t go sliding into splits every time you strike a pose. Got knee issues? Buy a mat that’s 1/4-inch thick (instead of the standard 1/8 inch).

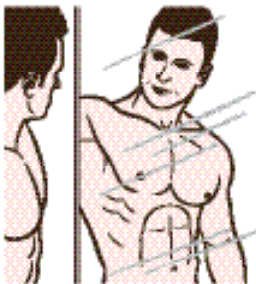


Men Getting Bendy

Guys are discovering yoga in record numbers—and research says that’s a very good thing

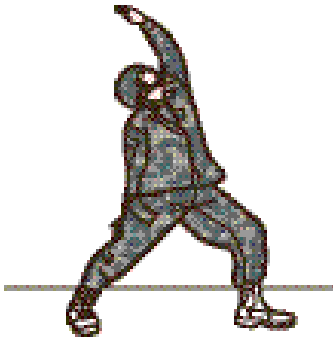
BY MANDY OAKLANDER

IF THE SOUND OF OM IN YOUR YOGA CLASS SEEMS TO HAVE DROPPED AN OCTAVE, IT’S NOT your imagination. From Hollywood brass and NFL linebackers to regular joes looking to get fit, men are turning to the ancient practice to build muscle, improve balance and flexibility and get the benefit yoga is probably best known for: stress relief. “We have definitely seen an increase in men in our classes over the past year,” says Jen Zweibel, a manager at the Equinox-owned chain Pure Yoga, where a third of the students in some classes are male. A 2016 poll estimates that men make up 28% of the 36 million Americans who practice yoga, and a handful of recent studies on male yogis suggest that all those downward dogs are



MORE SATISFACTION

Men who practiced yoga had a better body image than those who worked out in a gym, a recent study found. Yoga also improved their sex life, with men reporting more desire, control and stamina in a study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*.



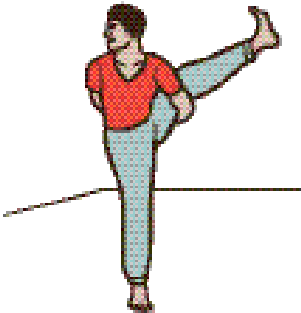
REDUCED STRESS

Yoga’s reputation for being relaxing is well established, and a host of recent research on active-duty soldiers backs it up. Researchers found that regular yoga reduced stress, anxiety and depression while improving memory.



LESS ANXIETY

When Vietnam vets practiced yoga, their symptoms of PTSD lessened, according to a study in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress Disorders and Treatment*. A paper that examined police cadets found that taking just six yoga classes reduced tension and anger.



IMPROVED BALANCE

Preventing falls and injury requires good balance. And five months of regular yoga gave men substantially better posture and balance, a 2014 study in the *International Journal of Yoga* found.



A HEALTHIER HEART

Daily yoga was linked to lower blood pressure and cholesterol in older men, according to a study in the journal *Age*. Hypertension and high cholesterol are both major risk factors for heart disease, the U.S.’s No. 1 killer.



INSOMNIA RELIEF

A study in the *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research* found that after eight weeks of yoga, 40 males with insomnia (which can increase stress) were significantly less stressed and more self-confident. Other research suggests that regular yoga might improve sleep quality and duration.

Sources: *Yoga Journal*; *Consciousness and Cognition*; *Psychological Reports*; *Perceptual & Motor Skills*; *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*