

Strike a pose...

YOGA FOR

BEGINNERS



Of course, there's a bit more to yoga than just breathing, but you really don't need to be able to do much more to get started

Since gaining popularity in the 70s, yoga has become one of the UK's favourite fitness classes. So what's all the excitement about a bit of bending and stretching?

Julia Buckley explains...



Fancy giving yoga a go but don't know your asana from your elbow? Simply take a deep, slow breath. That's it. Breathe right down into your tummy and exhale. There you go – you've performed your first yoga exercise.

Of course, there's a bit more to yoga than just breathing, but you really don't need to be able to do much more to get started. Scrap those images of sprite-like creatures, chanting their way to higher planes, legs twisted into seemingly impossible knots. Today, yoga is practiced by people of all shapes, sizes, fitness and flexibility levels, with classes widely available in health clubs and community spaces across the country.

People do yoga for a huge variety of reasons, but some of the main benefits include tightening and toning the whole body, better posture, feelings of

The aims of yoga are balancing, strengthening and relaxing the body using stretches and controlled breathing

wellbeing, stress release, and reduced risk of injury from other forms of exercise. But is it for you?

"I'd recommend yoga to anyone," says Barbara Currie, one of the UK's best known yoga instructors. "I was 29 when I took

my first yoga class and I was as stiff as a board," she admits. "Luckily though I was really inspired by my teacher. She was in her sixties, but had the body of an 18 year old."

Balancing the body

From elite athletes to those wanting to slim down and shape up, Barbara says yoga has something to offer everyone. "Sports tend to work one side of the body more than the other," she says. "Even if you don't do sport, a lot of people favour one side without realising it. Yoga helps balance this out."

You might be surprised to learn that sports stars like Wayne Rooney, boxer Evander Holyfield and even the Welsh rugby team regularly practice yoga moves. Footballer Ryan Giggs also recently released an exercise video inspired by yoga.

But if you're more interested in shedding pounds than

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Jennifer Aniston



performing on the sports field, Barbara Currie says yoga still has a lot to offer. "I always encourage people who want to lose weight to try yoga," she says. "They are usually surprised at how quickly their bodies firm up."

As you've probably noticed, there are also a fair few celebrities who'll attest to yoga's body sculpting benefits, including Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Meg Ryan and Geri Halliwell.

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Mellowing the mind

But it's not all about the physical. Many people, celebs included, turn to yoga to help them through tough times. Jennifer Aniston spoke about how she discovered yoga when going through her high-profile split with Brad Pitt, saying: "Yoga calms me down. It's a therapy session, a workout and meditation all at the same time."

Although no one can now say for sure, yoga is said to have originated in India around 3000 BC. Archaeologists have even

found images carved in stone that resemble some of the yoga poses (asanas) still practiced today. The word 'yoga' essentially means 'union' and it's all about taking a holistic approach to fitness. The aims are balancing, strengthening and relaxing the body using gentle movements, stretches and controlled breathing.

"On a deeper level, yoga is something that makes us feel great," explains yoga instructor Sally Lovett. "By practicing and reinforcing the connection between our bodies, minds and hearts, we feel more in tune with ourselves, others and the world around us."

'Finding a plumber'

Barbara Currie advises asking around friends and family to find a good yoga class. "It's a bit like finding a plumber," she says. "A recommendation from someone you know is worth a lot. But if you don't like the first class you go to, don't give up. Yoga teachers all have their

own styles of teaching, so you might still enjoy someone else's classes."

Yoganearyby.com has a searchable database of classes, where you can even specify the day and time of class you'd like.

If you can't get to a class or would feel more comfortable trying it out at home first, a quick search on Amazon will reveal the massive array of DVDs and books available to guide you through the moves. Barbara Currie's **Power of Yoga** DVD (£10.99) or **10 Minute Yoga Workouts** book (£14.99) are both perfect for beginners.

Yogamatters.com have a whole section of books and DVDs picked out for beginners – Shiva Rea's **Yoga for Beginners** DVD (£15.32) and **The Yoga Bible** (£12.99) make good starting points.

Different types of yoga are more difficult and more energetic than others, so think about that before choosing which one to go for



WHAT TO WEAR

You don't really need any special kit to get started in yoga. The exercises are usually performed on yoga mats, but most classes will provide these. You can wear anything that's easy to move in. However, specifically designed yoga clothing will usually be more comfortable and you can feel



Gathered singlet, £35 and drawstring pants, £45 from Asquith London

confident that it's been made to cope with yoga moves. Alice Asquith is founder of the favoured label of many a yoganista, Asquith London. She offers the following tips:

Yoga tops need to be long enough and not too low cut so that your focus is on your practice and you're not pulling up trousers or pulling down tops.

Try and avoid clothing with underwires and belts. It is important to feel that your movement is unrestricted.

Layering garments works well because you may find that you start off a bit chilly then gradually warm up during your practice and need to cover up again in the Sivanasa (cool down) phase.

Fabric is very important – natural, breathable fabrics that feel soft are a wonderful addition.

Knowing that you look good in your yoga clothes will make you feel more positive about yourself, and a positive outlook can help you succeed in yoga.

A good choice in beginner's basics from the Asquith London range would be their gathered singlet (£35) and drawstring pants (£45).

Available online at asquith-yoga-clothing.co.uk

fitness for Women readers will receive a 20% discount until 1st June. Simply visit asquith-yoga-clothing.co.uk and type FFW20 into the promotional code box when ordering online.



TYPES OF YOGA

Here's a quick rundown of the most common types of yoga practiced in the UK:

Hatha A great choice for beginners, Hatha yoga classes are quite slow paced and use basic yoga poses, usually incorporating some relaxation and breathing techniques.

Vinyasa means 'breath-synchronised movement'. This type of yoga is usually based around a series of poses known as Sun Salutations in which the body is encouraged to work with the breath to build strength and flexibility.

Ashtanga means 'eight limbs'. As the name suggests, this is a more demanding type of exercise involving faster movements with one pose flowing into the next. Power yoga classes are based on Ashtanga, but these may not use the traditional poses.

Iyengar The aim of Iyengar yoga is to encourage correct bodily alignment. Poses are held for longer and props such as straps, blocks and yoga blankets are often used.

Kundalini This type of yoga focuses on energising and controlling the breath. Chanting and breathing exercises are usually included.

Bikram Also known as Hot Yoga, Bikram is performed in sauna-like conditions, in temperatures of around 40°C. The sweating this causes is thought to be cleansing and, because warmer muscles stretch more easily, more advanced postures can be achieved. (This is not recommended for beginners.)

Julia Buckley is a fitness writer and trainer based in North West London, visit her website at fitnessrocks.co.uk

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