

Common Misconceptions About Yoga

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If you are suffering from a chronic condition or looking for an overall preventive health plan, you may want to consider yoga. But before you embark, there are a number of misconceptions that I'd like to clear up:

1. Yoga is only for stress relief. Yoga is indeed a powerful stress buster. Even a single session can make you feel calmer. Since stress is a factor in a host of medical conditions--from high blood pressure to infertility--yoga can indeed help. But yoga is much more. A regular yoga program can strengthen muscles, deepen breathing, improve balance and enhance flexibility. Yoga has been shown in studies to help people with asthma, arthritis, depression, heart disease and many other problems. And even if a condition like cancer isn't caused by stress, getting diagnosed and undergoing treatment can be stressful and yoga can, at the very least, help with that.
2. Yoga is a religion. Although yoga came out of ancient India it is not a form of Hinduism or a covert way to propagate any religion. In fact, yoga is happily practiced by Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Moslems, atheists and agnostics alike. There is certainly a spiritual side to yoga but you don't have to subscribe to any particular beliefs to benefit from it. If chanting Om or some other aspect isn't for you, I've never seen a teacher object to a student skipping it.
3. Only the young and supple need apply. In India, I saw yoga therapy centers treat people with all kinds of physical, mental and emotional disabilities. It has been used successfully on schizophrenics, the mentally retarded

and people who are bound to bed or wheelchairs. All that's required is some mental awareness and the will to give it a try.

4. Yoga therapy is the same as taking a yoga class. Most yoga therapy is done one-on-one or in small groups with experienced teachers. The average yoga teacher in a health club, however, isn't likely to know enough to be able to do therapeutic yoga safely and well. While general classes may be great preventive medicine, many are too demanding for someone with a serious medical condition. If you have any doubts, be sure to speak with the teacher and ask about her yoga experience, what techniques she employs and her experience in working with people like you.
5. Yoga is a quick fix. Every single yoga expert I met in India stressed the need for the student to practice, even if only for a few minutes a day. The effect is cumulative over a long period of time as you slowly gain more control over your body and mind. Yoga may be strong medicine but it is slow medicine. And you get back in proportion to what you put in.