



# WHY OUR BODY LOVES YOGA

## Gentle Poses Foster Flexibility

by Marlaina Donato

Although media coverage of yoga often highlights advanced yoga poses, the practice is not reserved solely for super-flexible folks. Benefits are available to everyone of any age or physical type.

“Many people assume that yoga requires the ability to be a contortionist. Yoga is an internal process and can meet us wherever we are,” says yoga therapist Kimberly Carson, of Mindful Yoga Works, in Portland, Oregon. Springing from the theory that half of our capacity to become more flexible lies less in the muscles than in the nervous system, this calming practice helps the body release tension and achieve a suppler state.

### Why it Works

Yoga poses don't need to be intense to have a significant effect. Gentle, regular practice can improve range of motion, increase muscle strength and promote circulation of the synovial fluid surrounding joints that supplies oxygen and nutrients to cartilage.

“Basic yoga is just as beneficial as more advanced ideas of yoga, especially in terms of body awareness,” says Piper Abbott, an integrative yoga therapist and teacher who owns Burlington Yoga, in Burlington, Vermont. “Where our attention goes, energy flows. When we're holding a posture and directing this focused awareness into the sensation of a stretch, we're learning to read our body.”

Agility is usually associated with muscles and joints, but underlying flexibility goes deep to further enhance wellness. Stiff muscles often go hand-in-hand with stiff arteries, for example, but appropriate exercise can have a positive effect there, too.

According to studies by physical therapist Miriam Cortez-Cooper, Ph.D., and her colleagues during her tenure at the University of Texas at Austin, stretching exercises performed for 11 weeks improved flexibility of the carotid artery—the main vessel that transports blood to the brain—by 23 percent. Such an increase did not result from aerobic exercise or strength training.

### Every Body Can Benefit

“Yoga is truly for any and every body. Flexibility or a lack thereof can be found in anatomies of any shape. Many options

for poses exist to help you find the version that works best for you. Yoga props such as blocks and straps can provide support to encourage experimenting while ensuring a safe approach,” says Anna Guest-Jelley, CEO of Curvy Yoga, in Portland, Oregon. She loves sharing the value of yoga with people of all sizes. “What’s important is working wherever you are within your current range of motion, so your body can open to new movements appropriately.”

Maintaining a regular practice offers an opportunity for individuals living with chronic pain or undergoing cancer treatment to feel more at ease. “Even in cases of severe fibromyalgia, some movement is better than none, and can foster better sleep. Restorative sleep can help to heal microtears in muscles, which can be common. Non-goal-oriented yoga also offers layers of benefits for cancer patients, both supporting physical function, as well as offering a way to practice kindness towards the body/mind during tough times,” says Carson.

For seniors, yoga is an excellent

way to foster better flexibility, even in the presence of osteoarthritis. Studies conducted by Dr. Sharon Kolasinski, of the University of Pennsylvania, found that Iyengar yoga reduced joint stiffness and pain reduction during an eight-week period in people with knee osteoarthritis. Chair yoga, though popular with seniors, can introduce unnecessary risk if not tailored appropriately for those with osteoporosis, Carson cautions. “It’s important for older adults to find classes taught by appropriately trained instructors. Inappropriate chair sitting itself can compro-

mise bone health, so teachers trained in spinal health and planes of action are recommended.”

No matter the level of an individual’s agility, improved flexibility is a boon, especially when it goes beyond the physical to embrace mental and spiritual aspects. Abbott remarks, “Yoga has taught me not only how to move and relate to my body, but how to gracefully adjust to change and the challenges of life.”

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## WHERE TO LEARN MORE

**Yoga for Every Body: Basics for Alignment and Flexibility**, Diane Finlayson DVD, [Tinyurl.com/Yoga-Align-Flex](http://Tinyurl.com/Yoga-Align-Flex)

**Curvy Yoga** YouTube videos, include 15-minute morning wake-ups with Anna Guest-Jelley, [YouTube.com/user/CurvyYoga/featured](http://YouTube.com/user/CurvyYoga/featured)

**Power Yoga for Flexibility**, Rodney Yee DVD, [Gaia.com/person/rodney-ye](http://Gaia.com/person/rodney-ye)

**Relax into Yoga for Seniors: A Six-Week Program for Strength, Balance, Flexibility and Pain Relief**, a book by Kimberly Carson, [MindfulYogaWorks.com/products](http://MindfulYogaWorks.com/products)