



by Meredith Montgomery

Every September, National Yoga Month (YogaMonth.org) expands awareness of yoga's proven health benefits. This 5,000-year-old practice that originated in the East and aims to unify body, mind and spirit, continues to gain popularity in the West as a valuable tool in preventive healthcare and a complement to traditional medicine. These are just some examples of the multiple health benefits a regular yoga practice can provide.

Improved Balance, Flexibility and Range of Motion

Having the balance to stand on one foot and being flexible enough to touch your toes are often falsely perceived as prerequisites for yoga class. In reality, practicing yoga is a way to gain such abilities. The Mayo Clinic further notes that with the improved balance, flexibility and range of motion gained through yoga practice, injuries from other physical or day-to-day activities become less likely.

Increased Strength

Although weights are not used in yoga, muscle strength, bone strength and endurance are boosted via the disci-

pline's weight-bearing postures. When an American Council on Exercise study recruited 34 healthy women to practice yoga three times a week, they could do an average of six more push-ups and 14 more curl-ups after eight weeks than they could before.

Relief from Chronic Pain

Research from institutions such as the Mayo Clinic has shown that practicing yoga postures can reduce pain associated with cancer, multiple sclerosis, autoimmune diseases and hypertension, as well as other chronic conditions, including back and neck pain. A study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* found that subjects suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome improved their grip strength and reported less pain due to a yoga-based regimen. A nerve test also indicated improvement.

Better Breathing

Yoga emphasizes slow and deep breathing. Information on Yoga Alliance's educational website (YogaAlliance.org) indicates that these deliberate actions are known to activate the body's parasympathetic system, or relaxation response, while also improv-

ing lung function. According to the Northern Colorado Allergy & Asthma Clinic, individuals with asthma reported decreased frequency in the use of inhalers, increased relaxation and a more positive outlook on life after participating in regular yoga sessions for four months.

Boost in Mood

Yoga's deep breathing, combined with the need for balance and concentration, works to reduce stress, anxiety, heart rate and blood pressure levels, according to research published by the Mayo Clinic. Yoga's breathing techniques have reportedly reduced blood pressure more effectively than other soothing activities, such as listening to relaxing music.

Weight Loss

Because yoga tends to raise awareness of the benefits of healthy living, it also is used to motivate overweight individuals to gain control of eating habits and support their efforts to lose weight. Many teachers offer yoga programs specifically designed for those wanting to shed pounds. A 10-year lifestyle study of 15,500 adults in their 50s, published in *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, found that regular yoga practice was associated with less age-related weight gain.

Meredith Montgomery is a registered yoga teacher and has been practicing yoga for 12 years.

