Beyond Exercise

Yoga benefits more than muscles and minds—it's also great for the heart.

December 4, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

Before you dismiss yoga as New Age nonsense, hear this: Studies show that performing a series of yoga poses and deep breathing exercises at least three days a week can lower heart disease risk factors such as high blood pressure, obesity and high blood sugar. Yoga also clobbers stress, builds muscles, relieves menopausal symptoms and soothes chronic back pain. "Yoga is a process and a great journey toward health," says Michelle Spencer, an Atlanta-based yoga instructor. "Twice a week is a great way to begin, even if just for 10 minutes in the morning."

DO-IT-YOURSELF YOGA

You don't have to practice yoga in a studio, especially since classes can be expensive. Instead, grab a mat and try these DVDs at home.

Beginner: *Yoga for Beginners* (Starz Entertainment, $14.98)

Intermediate/Advanced: *Vinyasa Flow Yoga Session II With Seane Corn* (Gaiam, $20)

Children: *Make It a Family Affair With YogaKids 2: ABCs for Ages 3–6* (Gaiam, $15)

Stress: Stress Relief Yoga for Beginners (Gaiam, $15)

READY TO CHANT "OM?" THESE FOUR MOVES WILL GET YOU STARTED.

Warrior II

Stand with feet 3 to 4 feet apart. Turn your right foot out, press left heel down, and bend your right leg so the thigh is nearly parallel to the floor, shin is perpendicular to the floor and your knee is directly above your ankle. Extend your arms out to the sides, over your legs. Turn your head gently to the right. Hold the pose, breathing regularly, then switch sides. Can't keep your balance? Keep your hands on your hips and don't bend your knee as much.

Chair Pose

Stand with feet about shoulder width apart. Bend your knees, keep legs parallel, and lower your hips as if you were going to sit in a chair. Tilt hips and pelvis forward, protecting your lower back, and stretch your arms out above you. Hold for 30 seconds, breathing gently.

Downward Facing Dog (Partial Inversion)
Begin on all fours. Spread your fingers and press them firmly into the floor. Bring knees off the floor while lifting your tailbone toward ceiling. Gradually straighten legs by shifting thighs back, pressing heels toward the floor. Keep shoulders down and away from ears, and keep head between arms. Let your head hang loosely. Stay for 1 minute, breathing normally. Too hard? Slightly bend your knees.

Seated Spinal Twist
Sit on the floor with your legs stretched out in front. Cross your right foot over left thigh, keeping right knee pointed toward ceiling. Place your left elbow outside right knee and your right hand on the floor behind you. Gently twist right, moving from your abdomen. Keep your butt on the floor; with each inhale, sit slightly taller; with each exhale, turn a bit farther to the right. After about a minute, gently return to center. Switch sides and repeat.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/yoga-benefits-heart-15729-9778