

Heart Health and the Benefits of Yoga

The bad news

According to the American Heart Association, coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States.

The good news:

Yoga is an ancient practice that combines physical postures, meditation and breathing exercises that can help to create a healthy heart.

Many people practice yoga for the relaxation and flexibility benefits, but yoga also strengthens muscles, increases balance, improves both circulation and respiration and reduces stress.

So, how does Yoga help your heart? Recent research has shown that Yoga and meditation can reduce blood pressure, lower the pulse rate, improve the elasticity of the arteries, and regulate heart rhythm. In short, **Yoga is good for your heart!** Yoga also reduces the levels of cytokine 6, which is a substance that increases inflammation in the body. Inflammation plays a major role in age-related diseases including heart disease and diabetes. In addition, Yoga increases heart rate variability (a measure of the ongoing variation of heart rate) and a higher HRV is a sign of a healthy heart.

Scientists have also noted that practicing Yoga can help regulate the sympathetic nervous system, which causes the heart rate to rise, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows down the heart rate. These two nervous systems ensure that the heart rate remains stable. Research has also shown that practicing Yoga at least three times a week lowers the risk of health complications like high blood pressure, pulse hypertension and overall risk of heart diseases and helps prevent the recurrence of cardiovascular events.

Now, let's take a look at stress. We all experience stress in our lives; however, excess stress is considered a major contributing factor in heart disease. When a stressful situation arises, your heart rate and blood pressure rise, and stress hormones that can injure the heart and blood vessels are released. Yoga is widely known for its ability to reduce stress and promote a calm, relaxed state which can reduce stress hormones, decrease the heart rate and lower blood pressure, helping to control and prevent heart disease. Our breath is directly connected to our state of mind, to our nervous system and has a strong influence on the rhythm of the heart through the inner connections in the central nervous system. Deep, steady breathing – smoothing and lengthening of the breath slows the heart rate, oxygenates the blood and induces a feeling of calm – reducing the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

The health benefits are numerous, but Yoga just plain feels good! It's common for those who practice Yoga to rave that coming to the mat each day feels like coming home. Often, practicing Yoga naturally leads one to choose a healthier lifestyle, which can also minimize heart disease.

Going inward and noticing the subtleties of the physical and energetic body through Yoga and meditation can create amazing and wonderful changes – and along with these benefits comes a heart bursting with health!

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