

Yoga for Runners

Are you a runner? Would you like to prevent or heal injuries and improve performance? Many runners are discovering that yoga can provide these benefits and transform running into a moving meditation.

Kelly McGonigal, PhD, who teaches yoga, group fitness and psychology at Stanford University and is the author of *Yoga for Pain Relief* (New Harbinger 2009), shares how yoga can help your running.

Preventing and Healing Injuries: According to Susi Hately Aldous, a yoga teacher in Calgary, Alberta, and author of *Anatomy and Asana: Preventing Yoga Injuries* (Eastland Press 2006), yoga helps runners avoid or heal injuries by developing two important skills: balance in the body and awareness in the mind.

“As great as running is, it creates physical imbalances that lead to inefficiencies and injuries. Yoga can help by stretching what is tight, strengthening what is weak and improving the essential stabilizers of the body.” Some key areas that runners need help releasing are the calves, quadriceps, hamstrings, hip flexors, back and shoulders. Poses that stretch these muscle groups and strengthen the comparatively weaker hip abductors and rotators create more balance in the lower body. This balance relieves some of the most common complaints of runners, including pain in the iliotibial band, knees and lower back.

Yoga also teaches runners how to tell the difference between “good” pain and “bad” pain by bringing awareness to the different sensations in challenging poses. Rather than blocking out the sensations, you learn to pay attention to the fatigue of your quadriceps in warrior pose or the stretch of your hamstrings in a forward bend. If you develop this self-awareness in yoga, you are better able to tolerate the safe “burn” of challenging endurance. At the same time, you are less likely to ignore the louder warning signals of strain or exhaustion that can lead to injuries.

Improving Performance: Yoga focuses on alignment and on long holds of challenging poses. The challenge becomes: How can you stay in the pose with the least amount of effort needed to maintain good posture and safe alignment?

According to Sage Rountree, PhD, author of *The Athlete’s Guide to Yoga* (VeloPress 2007), learning this kind of relaxed effort translates directly from the mat to the trail, boosting your stamina and speed. “Both yoga and running take you to the edge of intensity—to your perceived limits—and teach you how to use form and breath to stay there. Adopt the most efficient, economical form you can, breathe as deeply as you can, and you will learn what you are made of.

SIDEBAR: Tips for Runners

Stacey Shipman, MEd, a yoga teacher and coach in Weymouth, Massachusetts, offers the following advice to runners beginning a yoga practice:

- Start small. You can always build up to making yoga a bigger part of your training. Practicing one or two poses after each run is a great way to introduce yoga into your routine.
- Make time for some in-person group or private instruction, especially when you are starting out. Look for a teacher or trainer who gives you personal feedback on the important details of form, breath and how to adapt poses for your needs.
- Focus less on goals and more on your experience. Runners often emphasize objective markers of success or progress, like running a 7-minute mile or finishing a race. In yoga, this approach is not as helpful. Focus on how your body feels and the quality of your breath, not on whether you can touch your toes or master a difficult pose.
- Don't skip relaxation. Relaxation is when the body integrates the positive changes of your practice and recovers from the stress of training.
- Have patience. Yoga is a lot slower than running—and that goes for the changes you will see from your yoga practice, as well. Look for benefits over weeks or months, not minutes or days.

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