

HEALTH BENEFITS OF HATHA YOGA

- * Balance of Strength and Flexibility**
- * Improved Organ Function**
- * Better Circulation**
- * Relaxation**

Hatha yoga is an ancient practice that was developed to promote physical health as well as an awareness of one's true nature. It consists of a series of postures, called asanas, and various breathing exercises, called pranayama, which encourage balance between the physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual aspects of a human being. In short, hatha yoga promotes health.

A hatha yoga practice has both short and long-term benefits. There is a sense of well being that is felt almost immediately. Other health effects emerge over time. The physiology of the entire body is affected, including the muscles, the joints, the internal organs, the endocrine glands, and the nervous system. In addition, the mental/emotional and neuro-behavioral aspects of us benefit greatly from regular hatha practice.

Balance of Strength and Flexibility

As a means of developing and maintaining the musculoskeletal system, hatha yoga provides a balance of strength and flexibility. This is important because strength without flexibility limits fluid and efficient motion, and flexibility without strength leaves one open to injury. There are few other forms of exercise that provide this balance.

Medical research has confirmed that slow and prolonged stretch, as opposed to callisthenic type exercise, is the best means to re-establish flexibility. The muscles and the connective tissue surrounding the muscles fibers can be restructured to attain a greater resting length. The various asanas have been carefully designed to lengthen as well as strengthen each of our major muscle groups.

This approach also promotes a balance between the opposing muscles that act on a joint. The muscles that bend the joint are developed in relation to those that straighten the joint in such a way as to improve the alignment of the body. Proper alignment together with increased flexibility and strength can relieve painful conditions caused by structural problems such as lower back pain, headaches, etc. It also can lead to an efficiency of movement that allows us to perform activities with less strain.

Improved Organ Function

It has been shown from the level of microscopic cells to entire organ systems, that the structure of something and how it functions are closely interrelated. It follows that as the structure of a body part is changed, the function can also be affected. An example of this is the improvement in breathing that is often seen following the release of tension and restriction in the muscles and connective tissue of the chest and upper back. In another instance, proper spinal alignment allows the nerve fibers passing through the spinal cord to function freely. This in turn can allow the organ structures those nerves supply to operate normally.

The internal organ systems benefit from regular hatha yoga practice in another way. Experiments have shown a decrease in resting heart rate and blood pressure as well as increased cardiovascular endurance after as little as six weeks of daily hatha yoga practice. The resting respiratory rate also decreases and the amount of air taken in with each breath increases. These effects allow the heart and lungs to work more efficiently.

Better Circulation

The nervous and hormonal systems are felt to benefit from improved blood circulation brought on by the practice of postures and breathing. For example, inverted poses such as the shoulder stand, headstand, and dog stretch are thought to improve local blood flow to the thyroid gland (located at the base of the neck). The thyroid gland regulates the metabolism of the entire body; consequently improving the blood flow to this gland regulates and optimizes these metabolic effects, promoting balance and health on many levels. It has been suggested that improved blood flow to the various nerve plexuses throughout the body improves their neural functioning.

In conjunction with a sensible balanced diet, hatha practice also promotes optimal functioning of the digestive system. By toning and strengthening the muscles of the stomach, small and large intestines, and by increasing blood flow to the various organs of digestion, many digestive problems can be alleviated.

Relaxation

The state of deep relaxation achieved through hatha yoga has important health benefits. Medical science has termed the effects of this deep relaxation the "Relaxation Response." A small area within the brain called the hypothalamus regulates the various effects. The hypothalamus also controls the stress response, which has the opposite effect on the body. During relaxation the rate of breathing, pulse rate and blood pressure decrease. The metabolism (the body's need for energy) is also diminished, and the amount of tension in the muscles is reduced. A healthful balance of hormones is promoted.

Many of these effects not only occur during relaxation but also are sustained over time when regular practice is maintained. Other benefits are harder to quantify in scientific experiments, but are important to our overall health. The discipline of a regular practice promotes calmness of the mind and emotions. This discipline also seems to facilitate other lifestyle changes such as eating a wholesome diet and modifying use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. There is a sense of vitality and self-confidence that evolves from regular practice that supports an individual in all of their activities.