

Yoga: A complementary health approach

By Natalie McGill

While walking down the street you may have spotted it: A rolled-up rubber mat sticking out of a bag carried by someone in workout clothes.

Sooner or later that mat will get rolled out for yoga, a health practice that exercises the mind and body through a series of postures, meditation and breathing techniques, says

Wendy Weber, ND, PhD, MPH, branch chief in the Clinical Research in Complementary and Integrative Health Branch of the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health's Division of Extramural Research.

But yoga is more than just a trend or fad — it's a route to better physical and mental health.

"Different people take up yoga for different reasons," Weber says. "They may be trying to maintain their health and well-being, improve their physical fitness, relieve stress or enhance their quality of life. Some people are also trying



to relieve symptoms of other overarching health problems."

Practicing yoga works out your body from head to toe, from your neck to your legs and nearly everything in between, including your arms, back, heart, lungs, shoulders and wrists, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There are many types of yoga, ranging from styles such as Iyengar yoga, which sometimes uses props, to Bikram yoga, where classes are taught inside rooms with hot temperatures.

"In the popular press, yoga articles are trying to address the misconceptions that yoga is only for a particular type of person — young, fit and female," Weber says. "In the community, you are beginning to see advertising by yoga studios to attract a more diverse group of students including men, older adults, children and individuals who are overweight or obese."

While Weber says more research is needed to determine how effective yoga is for certain medical conditions, she says studies have shown that yoga poses, if done correctly and carefully, can assist people with health issues such as low-back pain and managing pain overall. Other research has shown that yoga may also help with lowering your heart rate, increasing your flexibility and reducing anxiety, among other health benefits, according to the center, which is part of the National Institutes of Health.

If you're thinking about starting yoga for the first time, get off to a safe start by letting your

health care provider know first, Weber says. Your provider can inform you about whether your personal health will affect your ability to do certain poses.

Some yoga poses may present health risks for people with conditions such as glaucoma, sciatica and high blood pressure, the center says. Women who are pregnant should use caution and consider modified or alternate poses with guidance of a health provider and yoga instructor. Nerve damage pain and

stroke have been reported as possible rare side effects from doing yoga.

Do your research and make sure to choose a certified instructor. After you choose the one who is best for you, talk with the instructor

before class begins to go over how physically demanding the class may be for you. Also, be sure to inform your instructor about any prior medical conditions you have, Weber says.

"Everyone's body is different and yoga postures should be modified based on individual abilities," Weber says. "Because the most appropriate way to practice yoga differs from person to person, it's best to get tips on how to practice yoga safely from your own instructor who knows about your individual needs and any special accommodations that may be appropriate."

Before attempting yoga poses, you should make sure to put on clothes you can stretch in and avoid wearing socks to give yourself a better chance at holding your balance, CDC says.

If possible, Weber says, seek out an introductory class on yoga where you can learn basic breathing techniques and poses.

"When you start practicing yoga, work closely with the instructor to make sure that you're doing the poses correctly," Weber says. "Most poses can be adapted for beginners or those with physical limitations."

>> For more yoga tips, visit www.nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga



Finding your calm: Breathing & meditation

Yoga can be done almost anywhere. But because breathing and meditation are important parts of yoga, you should try to find somewhere quiet that has few distractions. You'll also want to find an area with enough space for you to stretch in different directions.

It's important to inhale when doing upward poses and to exhale on poses where you bend forward, according to CDC. Also, remember to take your time with any new stretch, using care and patience to avoid muscle strain and to build in time at the end of poses to relax your muscles.

