



Deborah Blackwell's Quest for Perfect Health

Take a journey with this writer, wife, and mom of five who seeks ways to feel good and live a healthy life.

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Yoga for the heart



By Joanne Wu, M.D., Unity Spine Center



For the last 10 years, yoga has slowly become one of the trendiest forms of exercise. Popular media has marketed yoga to be neat packages of flexibility, strength, beauty and grace embodied in athletes and models. With the rising popularity of such campaigns, many are intimidated to step onto a yoga mat, let alone a class.

Shadowed by the fitness world, many people do not realize the power of yoga as an ancient form of movement based healing, especially for something as common as heart problems. According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention in 2012, cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of death in the US; one in every three deaths is from heart attack or stroke, equaling to 2,200 deaths/day. Despite Dr. Timothy McCall's book published in 2007 called Yoga as Medicine and Dr. M. Mala Cunningham's unique form of Cardiac Yoga TM (www.cardiacyoga.com), yoga as preventative and healing medicine for heart disease is still largely unrecognized.

Yoga literally means "to yoke" or "union" in Sanskrit, a language of India, the birthplace of yoga and yoga philosophy. It has many different styles called many different fancy Sanskrit names and created by many different people. Beyond the physical postures, yoga emphasizes strong breath work and through its philosophy encourages self compassion and inner peace.

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“With regular practice, you are strengthening and calming the nervous system,” says Dr. McCall.

As yogis and yoginis exercise their physical being, they become stronger, more flexible, and less cluttered with excess in their bodies. Moreover, “what is happening on the outside is a reflection of what is happening to every system in the body,” says Dr. McCall.

It is through intentional elimination of the excess and developing resilience in our mind and spirit that stress is also diminished.

Since stress is a known risk factor for many chronic medical conditions, especially those affecting the heart including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease and heart attacks, it is no wonder that yoga is an endorsed form of exercise from the American Heart Association. Yoga is also one of the fastest growing research areas for the National Institutes of Health, so we can help scientifically demonstrate what many people already self report.

According to the Yoga BioMedical Trust, 84 percent of people noted improved blood pressure while 94 percent of people noted improved cholesterol. This is in addition to other cardiac risk factors such as anxiety, poor sleep, obesity, smoking, and diabetes - all of which also demonstrated at least 75 percent improvement with yoga. Best of all, an average yoga class costs about \$12 in most studios. Now what drug can work on all of the above at that cost?

Not all forms of yoga is right for everyone. And not every form of yoga is safe for those who suffer from medical conditions such as heart disease since practicing advanced yoga postures in heat can lead to a sudden drop in blood pressure, or even worse falls or loss of consciousness. But yoga can be tailored for most individuals. It is important to have an open and honest discussion with your physician and potential yoga teacher about why you want to explore using yoga as a form of mind/body exercise and healing. But as we wrap up another year with heavier foods, busier schedules and hectic travels of the holiday season, keep in mind that yoga can be a wonderful way to introduce lightness to the heart and spirit, calmness to the mind, and rejuvenation for the body.

Dr. Wu is an E-RYT (experienced registered yoga teacher) She was also a personal trainer certified in a variety of fitness exercises and a multisport athlete for more than eight years.

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