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Can't Do Yoga? Think Again

If you've ruled out yoga for physical reasons, it might be time to reconsider.

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WebMD Feature

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In Hollywood and glossy magazines, yoga is usually associated with a Jennifer Aniston-type twisting her lithe body into a gravity-defying pretzel. So even though yoga is popular, it can be daunting to people who aren't already bendy and buff.

"The average citizen thinks, 'I can't do all those poses. I'm not cut out for yoga,' says Michele Olson, PhD, FACSM, professor of exercise science at Auburn University Montgomery in Montgomery, Ala.

But don't fold up your yoga mat just yet. It's got benefits for people of all shapes, sizes, and abilities. Here are four people who prove that yoga isn't just for a certain "type" -- and reasons you might give it a try.

Yoga's Physical Benefits

Yoga is good for flexibility, balance, and functional strength, Olson tells WebMD. It can also be a stress reducer.

"We all lose flexibility as we age," Olson says. "When you sit all day long, your hamstrings get tight, and your neck, shoulders, and back. Our muscles are not meant to be in one posture hour after hour."

Yoga can also have other health benefits. Researchers at Simmons College in Boston found that hatha and relaxation yoga can help with controlling weight, lowering blood pressure, and improving mood. Yoga has also been shown to ease hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms in healthy women, as well as in breast cancer survivors.

There are yoga programs designed for different needs, such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson's. Some VA hospitals offer yoga to help patients recovering from strokes, brain injuries, and other illnesses.

"In a gym, you're really pushing yourself to go further when you're working out. In yoga, it's the opposite," says Megan Dunne, a yoga instructor in Chicago who works with individuals recovering from an injury or illness. "The yoga poses encourage all the range of motion that the body's designed to do. So when you're doing them mindfully and slowly, your body can learn through all the movements."

Turning to Yoga During Chemo

After she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer in 2008, Christine Blumer, president of Winediva Enterprises in Chicago, did yoga while undergoing chemo treatment.

"Even though I couldn't do many of the poses very well, it got me out of my head and helped deal with the depressive thoughts associated with my illness," Blumer tells WebMD in an email.

Blumer wasn't new to yoga at that point. "I'm a fat girl who tried yoga because I really hate 'the gym' experience," she writes, adding that she felt "taller and more fit" when she first started taking classes.

"I just like the fact that yoga isn't a scene and the goal is to be self-focused," Blumer writes. "I feel better knowing my fellow yoga-lovers probably aren't concerned about how ridiculous I look trying to pretzel my plus-sized body into fun and strengthening shapes."

Yoga for Overweight People

Blumer is not the only person with extra pounds to find a comfortable challenge in yoga.

When Megan Garcia signed up for yoga at Smith College in 1991, she recalls being intimidated because she was the "only overweight person in the class." She stuck with it and noticed she started not only gaining strength, but feeling and sleeping better. Now she is a plus-sized model and Kripalu-certified yoga instructor who teaches in New York and specializes in teaching yoga to people of all shapes and sizes.

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Garcia found yoga to be transformative in unexpected ways. "Before I started doing yoga, I really lived life from the neck up," she says. "After yoga, I began to really feel at home in my skin. If I didn't have yoga, I can't imagine feeling so good in my body. Yoga has made it comfortable for me to sit on the floor, to twist, to bend. It grounds me in my body."

RaeAnn Banker, now the owner of River Yoga in Lahaska, Pa., started taking yoga classes on her 42nd birthday as a present to herself.

"I was overweight and since my mother was morbidly obese, I knew I better do something or I was going to end up just like her," Banker tells WebMD in an email. "It took several months of driving by the yoga center before I got up the courage to go in. But once I started, I loved the classes. I was the weakest student in the class, but I kept going. I ended up losing 35 pounds over the next two years and becoming a yoga teacher. Yoga literally changed my life."

Yoga With Paralysis

Matthew Sanford, who is paralyzed from the chest down since a car accident at age 13, says yoga has helped him to "live more vibrantly."

"I was hooked right away," says Sanford, who is now a yoga instructor in Minnetonka, Minn., and the author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*.

Sanford recalls that first yoga class. "I got out of my wheelchair and took my legs wide into a V," he says. "It was really, really emotional. Tears were coming down my face. I didn't understand how I could feel so much."

Sanford knows some people may question why he tried it. "The answer is because it's your birthright. And that's true, whether you're disabled or not," he says.

"Yoga doesn't discriminate," he says. "Yoga will make you feel good. Yoga, at its root, is about bringing more awareness to action and to movement. The more you get in your body, the more connected you are to the world."

Tips for Trying Yoga

If you're out of shape or have disabilities, check with your doctor before starting yoga or a new exercise program. And keep these pointers in mind:

- **Choose a style of yoga that suits you.** Not all yoga classes are alike. Some are more vigorous than others; others may emphasize meditation. For an overview of different yoga styles, see WebMD's article, "[Which Style of Yoga is Best for You?](#)"
- **Find a teacher you like.** Classes that are billed as "intro" or "beginner" can attract a wide range of skill levels. You can sign up for a private one-on-one session customized to your needs.
- **Go at your own pace.** You can modify yoga poses using blocks, straps and other tools so that you don't overstretch. Ask your instructor for help and for modifications that suit your needs.
- **Listen to your body.** If you're forcing yourself into a position that's painful, that's a signal to stop.

Don't compare yourself to others. It's not about being as flexible as everyone else -- or as the people you see in yoga magazines. "Those images are people who have been doing [yoga] for a long time and are master yogis," Olson says. But remember, there's room for you, too.