Is yoga good for weight loss?

If you're struggling with your weight, yoga can be a useful tool for weight loss. The changes yoga brings about are not only physical, but also psychological and behavioural.

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When we think of yoga we often think of the mental health and mindfulness benefits.

However, whilst yoga isn't the most rigorous form of exercise, it may help you lose weight in several ways. According to one study, yoga can "offer diverse behavioural, physical, and psycho-social effects that may make it a useful tool for weight loss"[1].

There are many other benefits as Danielle Wills, yoga and meditation instructor for fitness app WithU Training, says:

"Yoga not only has mental benefits, such as relieving stress and improving your mood, but also physical benefits too. It can really help improve your posture and balance, lengthening the spine and becoming more flexible. It can help with back pain and symptoms of arthritis, and also contributes to healthy sleep."

Yoga and calorie burning

Yoga isn't generally considered an aerobic exercise. This means that it doesn't tend to get your body moving enough to significantly increase your breathing, heart rate, and blood flow - all of which can help you to burn calories quickly.

There are types of yoga that are more physically intensive than others. For example, power yoga and vinyasa keep you moving constantly, and are usually practised in hot yoga studios, which further increases your heart rate and helps burn more calories.

But when it comes to yoga for weight loss, there's more to it than the calories you use up in the moment, as Wills explains: "Yoga can help to regulate your nervous system, which allows your digestive system to process your food, increases the calories you burn while at rest, and helps your energy levels to stay at their best."

These factors may help explain why some people who regularly practise yoga find their weight a little easier to manage.

Yoga and mindfulness

Practising the art of mindfulness through yoga can also be a helpful tool for weight management. Studies suggest that mindfulness training, which focuses on the mind-body connection, can help combat binge eating and promote exercise in the short-term[2].

"Mindfulness, at its essence, is really about being a friend to yourself," explains Wills. "It allows you to hear yourself and recognise what you need in any given moment. Often, we're not used to listening to our true needs and when we ignore these signs, our nervous systems go out of sync: we find ourselves doing things that aren't helpful in the long run - like skipping workouts and eating without intention."
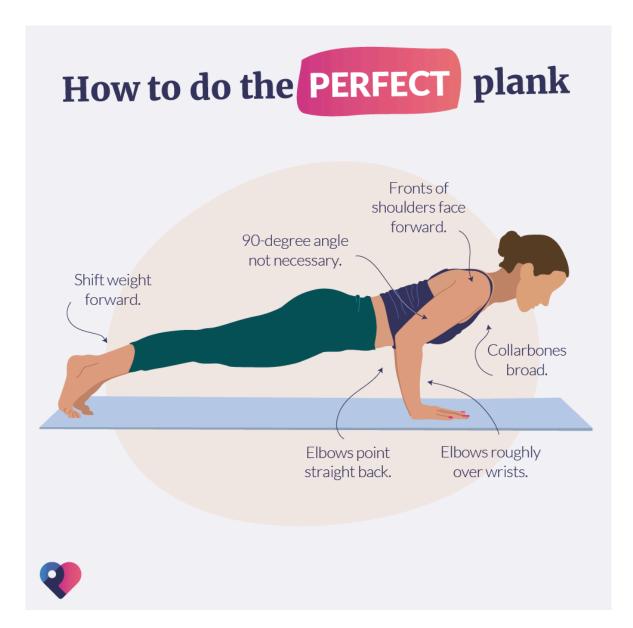
Yoga and sleep

Yoga, as an effective tool for reducing stress, may also help improve the quality of your sleep[3]. Regularly getting a good night's sleep has been linked with better weight management and the prevention of unhealthy weight gain.

One study looked at two groups of people who were limiting the calories they consumed. It found that the group who had restricted hours of sleep five nights per week burned less body fat than the group with normal sleeping schedules[4].

Which type of yoga is good for weight loss?

Those managing their weight, can opt for more intensive, higher calorie-burning forms of yoga - including power yoga, vinyasa, and any form of hot yoga. Wills also recommends the following:

"One of my favourite ways in which yoga can help facilitate weight loss is when it's used as a preparation for strength sessions. For example, practising your yoga squat can help you build up the flexibility to start training full depth squats in the gym, and movements like 'chaturanga' - which involves strength poses like the plank - can be great to build strength and muscle tone in your arms, especially if you add tempo or repetition to the mix."

How to do the PERFECT plank

Fronts of shoulders face forward.

90-degree angle not necessary.

Shift weight forward.

Collarbones broad.

Elbows point straight back.

Elbows roughly over wrists.

How often should I do yoga for weight loss?

Focusing on one type of yoga isn't always the best strategy for anyone concerned with long-term weight management. Remember, it's more important to make yoga and other, more strenuous physical activities a regular habit, than to commit to a limited selection of yoga poses. A bit of variety is usually more fun, after all.

Try to practice yoga as often as your weekly routine allows. Aim for three to five times of one hour practice a week, or if you're a beginner, ease yourself in with 20-minute sessions and gradually build up from there. If you wish to see results, always allow time in your week for more intense physical activities that get your heart pumping.

No matter your capability level, it's also important to balance more intensive yoga forms with days of more relaxing, restorative yoga poses or total rest days. This allows your body time to recover and protects against injury.

Further reading

1. Ross: A different weight loss experience: a qualitative study exploring the behavioral, physical, and psychosocial changes sssociated with yoga that promote weight loss.

2. Ruffault et al: The effects of mindfulness training on weight-loss and health-related behaviours in adults with overweight and obesity: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

3. Panjwani et al: Sleep, cognition, and yoga.

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