



Yoga explained

Yoga has become quite a commonplace exercise routine. But there is more to yoga than improved fitness and flexibility.

Yoga originated in India, where it traditionally combined a greater balance of spiritual and meditative aspects with physical poses. There are eight limbs to yoga. Poses or asana are just one 'limb'. Yoga can be physically demanding, increasing flexibility and muscle tone. The practice of yoga in the western world more commonly focuses on yoga as a type of exercise. However, yoga can also include deep breathing and meditative aspects, which can be relaxing.

Yoga that is right for you

Anyone can practice yoga, whatever their level of fitness. But there are many types of yoga. Some are

physically demanding, others more meditative. It is important to pick the type of yoga that suits your expectations and what you wish to achieve from it. If you choose to practice for stress relief it may be better to choose a more meditative type. If you are considering yoga to increase physical fitness, a more strenuous type that raises the heart beat may help towards the desired result (see *Types of yoga practice*).

Whatever type you choose, classes are often offered at beginner, intermediate or advanced levels. Outside of the types of yoga, classes can be adapted to the needs of specific groups, such as yoga for

pregnancy, mother and baby yoga and yoga for children. There are a few generally applicable pointers to consider before heading off to class.

- Don't eat for at least two hours before your yoga practice. Yoga is best practiced on an empty stomach.
- Wear loose fitting comfortable clothes that you can move easily in.
- If you have any pre-existing injuries, inform your teacher. They can then advise you to adapt any poses to avoid aggravating the injury.
- Yoga is not a competitive sport or about achieving the perfect posture. Realise your limitations, don't push yourself too far or compare yourself to others.

AT A GLANCE

Yoga types.

Benefits.

Qualifications.

Irish Yoga Association
PO Box 996
Dublin 7
tel (01) 4929213
email info@iya.ie
www.iya.ie

Yoga Therapy Ireland
20 Auburn Drive
Killiney
Co Dublin
tel (01) 235 2120
email yti@eircom.net
www.yogatherapyireland.com

The Yoga Alliance Ireland
1st Floor
55 South King Street
Dublin 2
tel (059) 647 3866
email info@yogaallianceireland.com
www.yogaallianceireland.com

Useful websites

Yoga Federation of Ireland
www.yfi.ie

Yoga Biomedical Trust
www.yogatherapy.org

British Wheel of Yoga
www.bwy.org.uk

Report by
Aisling Murtagh 

TYPES OF YOGA PRACTICE

- **Ashtanga** This is an intense form of yoga, where you move from one pose to another without a break. This makes it quite strenuous. Power yoga classes are based on Ashtanga yoga poses. But in classic Ashtanga yoga a set sequence of poses will be followed, whereas in power yoga the practice often diverts from the set sequence.
- **Bikram** This yoga is practiced in a heated environment, usually around 40°C. The heat is thought to loosen tight muscles, which makes the practice easier. But high temperatures can also make it more demanding. Lots of sweating is likely. It's advisable to wear light clothes and bring a towel and bottle of water to class. This type of yoga is not advised for pregnant women. It can also be called 'hot yoga'.
- **Hatha** This is a general term for yoga practice. It is also the most common type of yoga class. The practice mainly focuses on postures, regulated breathing and meditation. There will often be short periods of rest between postures where you go into a resting pose. This type is good as an introduction to yoga, as it is not too strenuous.
- **Kundalini** This type focuses on postures with rapid repetitive movement in tandem with the breath. A specific breathing technique is developed. Kundalini may sound intensive, but this is one of the more spiritual types of yoga, where emphasis is not just on the physical practice, but also breathing, chanting and meditation.
- **Iyengar** The emphasis during the practice of Iyengar yoga is on precision and correct alignment. Alignment refers to the precise way your body should be positioned to obtain maximum benefits and avoid injury. Props such as blocks or straps will often be used to assist you to get your body into alignment (see *Yoga gear*). Postures can be held for longer in this type of yoga practice than in others, and moves quickly from one pose to another.
- **Vinyasa** This yoga focuses on synchronising your breath with your movements. You will move from one pose to the next with each inhalation and exhalation. Practice is based on a series of poses called 'sun salutations'.

Precautions

Some yoga teachers may ask you to complete a medical questionnaire before taking a class. This is to ensure the teacher is aware of any health problems or injuries the student may have. If thinking of practicing yoga during pregnancy and you haven't practiced yoga before, you should not begin until you are twelve weeks pregnant. If attending a class not specifically designed for during pregnancy, inform your teacher that you are pregnant. In the later stages of pregnancy, it's best to attend a class that's been designed for your needs.

Benefits

The general benefits of yoga include stress relief, relaxation and improved physical fitness. Research has found that yoga can also benefit specific conditions, such as asthma, arthritis, back pain and carpal tunnel syndrome. However, it is important to distinguish between the general practice of yoga and yoga as a therapy. Some conditions may not benefit from practicing yoga in a general class situation.

Yoga can also be classed as a complimentary therapy, with the practice designed to suit individual needs. A yoga therapist will have qualified as a yoga teacher, but also hold additional qualifications in yoga therapy (see *Regulation*). If you have a pre-existing condition and are considering yoga therapy discuss this with your doctor first. Yoga Therapy

Ireland can provide details of qualified yoga therapists from the Yoga Biomedical Trust (see *Useful contacts*).

Regulation

In 2005, the National Working Group on the Regulation of Complimentary Therapists recommended statutory regulation for some complimentary therapists, such as herbalists and acupuncturists. Voluntary regulation was recommended for others, which includes yoga. Subsequent research by the Department of Health and Children found that the sector is fragmented and did not have effective structures for statutory regulation. Voluntary self-regulation is the approach now followed for all complementary therapists.

Self-regulation should be the responsibility of a single professional body with self-regulation mechanisms in place. This has yet to occur for yoga.

There are four main yoga organisations in Ireland, the Irish Yoga Association, Yoga Society Ireland, Yoga Alliance Ireland and Yoga Therapy Ireland. There are also other smaller bodies. There has been some consolidation, as the Yoga Federation of Ireland is an umbrella group for five yoga training organisations.

The national working group also recommended establishing one representative organisation as a first step before harmonisation of training standards. They felt that professional organisations should be separate from training providers.

Qualifications

Yoga teachers can come from a variety of backgrounds. They may have qualifications in other complimentary therapies, or have practiced yoga themselves for some time and then gone on to train and teach yoga. Teachers can have a sports and fitness background and teach classes such as aerobics, as well as yoga.

The actual training teachers receive has not been standardised. There are a number of yoga teacher training courses in Ireland. There are differences in their duration and topics covered. Apart from practical aspects of yoga, anatomy and physiology, first aid and yoga philosophy can be part of teacher training courses. They can range from 300 to 600 hours, usually run on a part time basis for 2 to 4 years. Foundation courses are also available, which are often around 200 hours in length. There are a number of specialist training courses in different types of yoga, such as Kundalini, Iyengar, Vinyasa, yoga during pregnancy and yoga for children.

In Ireland, there is no consensus on what the ideal training standards should be. Training courses run by members of the Yoga Federation of Ireland must be a minimum of 2 years comprising 400 teaching hours, which must include 50 hours of anatomy and physiology and a first aid certificate. Standards are difficult to determine as the different yoga bodies can have different views, valuing some aspects of yoga over others.

A national occupational standard for yoga teachers has been developed in the UK. Courses accredited by the British Wheel of Yoga (see *Useful websites*) have met the national standard, which must be a minimum of 500 hours.

A set of training standards for complimentary therapists is being drafted by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). When finalised, these standards could be applied to yoga qualifications.

Insurance

Yoga teachers are not obliged to have insurance, but they generally will. If they request the use of premises, such as a gym or community centre, it is unlikely they will be given permission to use the premises without adequate insurance.

Yoga Therapy Ireland recommends that teachers should have public liability and insurance against malpractice. If teachers instruct specialist classes such as yoga in pregnancy and yoga for children they should also have extra insurance cover.

Class practice

The cost of a yoga class will vary. On average, a drop-in class can cost between €14 and €20. Cost also seems to depend on where you live, with classes in Dublin more expensive than the rest of the country. The price may vary depending on the length of the class, which can last from one, to as long as two hours. Payment can often be made per class or for a block of classes. If you pre-pay for a course, it can be cheaper (provided you attend all the classes, of course).

Yoga can be practiced at home by following the instruction of a DVD. Geri Halliwell and Davina McCall are among the celebrities who you can strike a (yoga) pose with. It may be cheaper to buy a DVD, rather than fork out for a class each week. But this is not the ideal way to practice yoga, especially for the beginner. You can be unaware of what you are doing wrong and leave a greater risk of injury.

Yoga is best practiced with the guidance of a qualified teacher. Yoga teachers will encourage students to practice poses you learn in class at home. Even the experienced yoga student will attend class every now and again.

The websites of Yoga therapy Ireland and the Irish Yoga Association list teachers who have completed their training (see *Useful contacts*).

YOGA GEAR

There are an increasing number of yoga accessories on the market. We take a look at a few basics.

- **Mat:** A yoga mat can add to the comfort and safety of your practice and is probably the most essential yoga accessory. Mats can be provided at some yoga classes, so check with your teacher. When you strike a pose, you may hold it for a while and hands can get sweaty. Slipping is a possibility, which can lead to injury. Non-slip 'sticky' yoga mats are thought to be among the best. Some new mats can be a little slippery, which will reduce with use. Running the mat through the washing machine can help this. But don't spin the mat, leave it to drip dry. Mats can be purchased from sports stores, specialist yoga centres

and online.

- **Clothes:** Yoga teachers will advise wearing comfortable, breathable clothes that allow you to stretch easily. To save some embarrassment, t-shirts should not be too loose as they could fall over your head in forward bends. Lycra is not advised as it can be slippery. There is special yoga clothing available, but it really isn't essential. Yoga is usually practiced barefoot, so no fancy footwear is required.
- **Blocks:** These can be used as a prop to give some extra support in poses when needed. They are usually made from lightweight foam.
- **Straps:** These can be useful for poses where you can't stretch that extra little bit. They can assist you to get a pose that may otherwise be too difficult.



YOGA LINGO

Your yoga teacher may use some of the following terms. They are not as complex as they sound. They come from Sanskrit, the ancient language of India. The practice of yoga aims to unite body, mind and spirit, and the word yoga itself comes from Sanskrit word 'yog' meaning unity or oneness. Some teachers may not use these terms at all.

The Yoga Federation of Ireland code of conduct recommends avoiding the use of Sanskrit language. This is to help foster a greater sense of cooperation

between conventional and alternative therapies, rather than them being seen as polar opposites.

- **Asana** classic yoga postures.
- **Dharana** concentration.
- **Dhyana** meditation.
- **Mantra** chanting.
- **Pranayama** controlled breathing, breath awareness.
- **Pratyahara** withdrawal of the mind from sense awareness.
- **Savasana** relaxation.

choice comment

If considering taking up yoga, before you commit to a class, find out your yoga teacher's qualifications, their level of experience and what insurance they have. They should be more than happy to give you this information. Yoga is not widely thought of, or used as a complimentary therapy. It is more often practiced for general health and well being. It is not, like herbalism, a complimentary therapy that involves taking remedies, and it is not physically invasive, like acupuncture. However, it is important to establish training standards, especially for yoga teachers. National accreditation could help give the consumer a guarantee of a consistent, approved level of standards.