

Yoga Therapy for a Healthy Heart

"Health is wealth. Peace of mind is happiness. Yoga shows the way."

- Swami Vishnu-Devananda

WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

Coronary heart disease afflicts millions of people in the United States and in other western countries. This deadly disease is on the rise, especially among women. In fact, each year in the United States, heart disease kills around 366,000 women, making it a leading cause of death. Men and women are both equally at risk from coronary heart disease. Depending on coronary artery risk factors, such as your age and genetics, you can figure out which types of heart conditions you should try to avoid. For instance, if your family has a history of heart attacks, artery disease, or even diabetes, you should be careful about what you eat and how often you exercise, since foods with high amounts of fat and cholesterol can increase your chances of having a stroke or heart attack in the future.

Daily cardiovascular exercise is highly recommended in addition to a daily program of yoga and/or meditation. Yoga poses have been proven to be beneficial for people of all ages and fitness levels, and they can serve as an effective tool for preventing heart disease. Research has proven that including Yoga practices with other lifestyle changes can prevent or correct heart problems like hypertension and atherosclerosis.

HOW DOES YOGA WORK?

A yoga practice teaches people how to integrate yoga poses with breathing, and meditation techniques, empowering them to manage stress and notice habitual holding patterns in the body. Yoga exercise improves the health of the entire circulatory system, beginning with the production of blood. Improving circulation in the legs by means of daily Yoga stretching exercises helps to rejuvenate the blood by stretching the body's major blood vessels to keep them free flowing and elastic. In addition, yoga oxygenates the blood and pushes fresh nutrients to all peripheral vessels and capillaries. Improved circulation means that the brain will receive more oxygen, improving alertness, memory, and mood AND the vital organs receive the steady supply of nutrients they need for optimal functioning. Yoga requires the practitioner to take long deep breaths, and time for conscious



relaxation, and concentration. These practices have been proven to decrease the level of stress hormones in the body. Yoga poses help enhance the circulation of blood and body fluids and maintain the normal functioning of the immune system. All of these things allow the body to better maintain its homeostasis. The self-introspection practices of yoga allow the practitioner to develop a deeper sense of self-awareness, and that awareness will promote the discipline needed to develop an overall healthier lifestyle.

YOGA POSES EFFECTS ON THE HEART

Standing Poses: In these poses, the lateral walls of the heart are completely stretched and toned up so that blood can flow easily to those same places. In addition, everyday seated, standing and walking posture effects respiration, circulation and the health of the heart. Chronic slouching decreases circulation to all the vital organs, especially the heart. Learning how to stand up straight and engage all the muscles in the body build a stronger heart muscle.

Poses: Mountain Pose, Palm Tree, Triangle, Balancing Half Moon, Extended Side Angle

Inverted Poses: The most important task of the cardiovascular system is to supply blood to the brain. Inverted poses also help strengthen the heart, increase blood flow to the brain and may prevent the death of brain cells. Inverted Poses directly benefit the heart by increasing the volume of blood coursing through it. Essentially, inverting gives the heart a break. The heart works incessantly to ensure that freshly oxygenated blood makes its way up to the brain and the sensory organs. When inverting, the pressure is reversed. It is believed that

there are internal mechanisms that sense the increase in blood and slow the flow, thus reducing both blood pressure and heart rate.

Poses: Legs Against the Wall, Shoulder Stand, Bridge Pose, Plow Pose

Horizontal Poses and Forward Bends: These poses rest the heart and lungs so that they can be rejuvenated. When the lungs are well-rested, it is easier to breathe deeply and the air and nutrients of the body are processed with maximum efficiency.

Poses: Childs Pose, Downward Facing Dog, Standing Forward Bend, Seated Forward Bend, Pigeon Pose

Back Bending Poses: When back bending poses are done without strain, they can improve blood supply to the myocardium and tone up the cardiac muscle. Passive, supported backbends gently stretch the heart muscle and the cardiac vessels that supply the heart. This can increase blood flow to the heart and helps prevent arterial blockages. Backbends also help maintain the elasticity of blood vessels, and force the heart to contract, lengthening cardiac muscle and enhancing blood flow.

Poses: Reclining Bound Angle, Reclining Heroes Pose, Fish Pose, Camel Pose, Locust Pose, Full or Half Bow Pose, Cobra and Bridge Pose

The underlying belief of any type of yoga therapy is to enable the human system to function as efficiently and naturally as it possibly can. Modern medicine might be able to accelerate a healing process, but it is not a complete cure. We must take preventative measures like Yoga to keep the body flowing with its natural rhythms, or restore it back if that rhythm has been disrupted by disease. Indeed, if we can learn the proper way of doing yoga poses and breathing, as well as applying yoga philosophy in order to minimize stressful situations, we can learn how to minimize daily stress and maximize good health and longevity! ▲

Authors Note: This information is not intended to replace the advice of a doctor or health counselor. Please consult with your physician or other licensed health care professional for medical diagnosis, prescription, and treatment. If you are a first time practitioner of yoga, it is highly recommended that you seek out an experienced yoga teacher or therapist.