

COMMON YOGA MYTHS— DEBUNKED!

The practice of yoga has gained popularity in Singapore, but there is still some confusion about what this ancient method of self-transformation really is. *Lifewise* separates fact from fiction.

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MYTH #1 YOGA IS A RELIGION

As yoga is derived from an ancient Indian asceticism, it is commonly mistaken as part of Hinduism. In fact, it has its roots in the Indus Valley — an important civilisation that developed in the Indian subcontinent more than 5,000 years ago. That's way before Hinduism, which consists of thousands of different religious groups, and which evolved in India more than 3,500 years ago.

Yoga's perceived religious connection is perhaps why some followers are attracted to it, and why other people avoid it. In reality, yoga is not a religion in itself. It does not prescribe the worship of any god or deity, nor does it subscribe to any particular system of beliefs and practices that relates to the divine. Instead, yoga is a step-by-step journey that practitioners believe guide them towards self-training, self-awareness and self-discovery. A typical yoga session consists of various stretches in different postures, accompanied by meditation. But in yoga, meditation is not a religious observance, but a time to calm the mind and body.

MYTH #2 YOGA IS A SPORT

The popularity of yoga lessons offered by gyms and fitness clubs leads to the belief by many that it is a physical activity that trains the body. This is especially so since many yoga postures are similar in appearance to stretching exercises incorporated into other sports such as gymnastics.

In actual fact, there are eight parts to yoga. The set of physical postures (or *asanas* in Sanskrit) is just one of them. Others include breathing exercises (*pranayama*); self-regulation (*pratyahara*); concentration of mind (*dharana*); meditation (*dhyana*) as well as spiritualisation (*samadhī*). So yoga is much more than just a series of postures and movements. It is the art and science of physical, mental and spiritual development.

MYTH #3 YOU NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE TO PRACTISE YOGA

While yoga has a lot to do with the ease with which you can bend your joints, you don't have to be able to make like a pretzel before you can do it. All it needs for anyone to get started is to find a class that fits his or her flexibility and

fitness levels. True Yoga's spokesperson explains: "When there are certain yoga postures that are difficult to achieve, your instructors will propose variations where you can achieve the same benefits."

Yoga is more about developing and building flexibility at your own pace. Avid yoga practitioner Yap Shan Shan, 25, recalls: "I couldn't touch my toes before I started practising Ashtanga yoga but it didn't stop me. As time went by, I've found that my body has become more flexible." ❖

BEND SAFE

STARTING YOGA? GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR PRACTICE WITH THESE SAFETY TIPS.

▶ CONSULT A DOCTOR BEFORE YOU START

"This is especially important if you have a pre-existing medical condition, such as knee or lower back problems," says a spokesman for True Yoga. Your doctor or physiotherapist will be able to advise if yoga is suitable for you. Mr Khalid Anuar, Principal Physiotherapist at the Department of Physiotherapy at Tan Tock Seng Hospital adds: "If possible, you can even get them to write you a note to inform your yoga instructor on which poses to avoid."

▶ GET PROPER INSTRUCTION

Yoga is not without its risks. Think cartilage tears, muscle sprains and back pain. So don't try to learn through books, advises Mr Khalid. "Instead, find a certified instructor who can guide you appropriately and who genuinely cares for your physical well-being."

▶ TELL YOUR YOGA INSTRUCTOR ABOUT YOUR STATE OF HEALTH

Do so before the start of your class. True Yoga's spokesperson explains: "Even if you have a stiff neck from sleeping awkwardly the night before, let your instructor know. It will alert him or her to pay more attention to you when you're attempting a certain posture."

▶ LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Many beginners tend to be overly enthusiastic and attempt positions that go beyond their capabilities. Certain postures may feel awkward but they should never cause pain. Yoga is still a physical activity and injuries like sprains can happen. True Yoga's spokesperson says: "Perform the postures to the best of your abilities, never be competitive and do not overstrain yourself."

▶ GO FOR VARIATIONS

"If you're not able to assume the full posture of a particular yoga move, ask your yoga instructor to guide you towards a variation," says True Yoga's spokesperson. Never twist yourself into a posture your body is not ready for.

ROLL UP YOUR YOGA MAT IF YOU'RE...

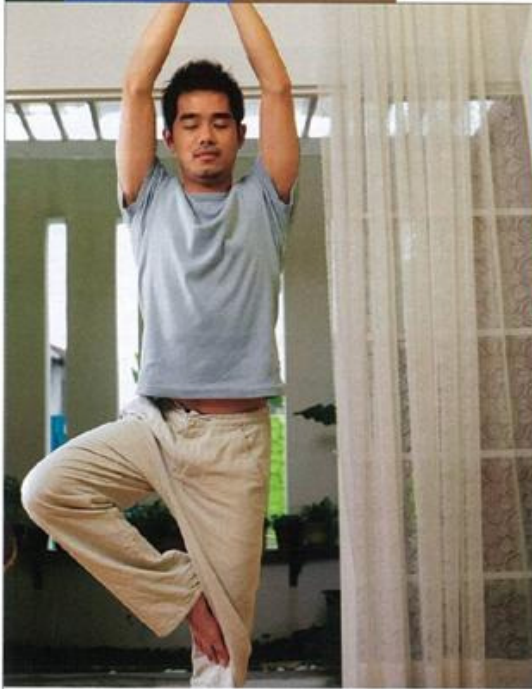
▶ PREGNANT

Generally, it is not safe to practise yoga between the eighth and 13th week of pregnancy. You should consult your gynaecologist, says Mr Khalid. "As you progress through your pregnancy, you should avoid certain poses, such as inversions and lying on your stomach. When you're pregnant, your body simply does not have the strength and balance to accomplish these poses."

▶ INJURED

If you're suffering from an acute injury such as acute back strain, tendonitis or joint sprains, avoid yoga. Mr Khalid explains: "It may cause pain and further inflammation to the injured areas. Instead, ask your doctor about the other type of exercises that will benefit you."

WELLNESS

**MYTH #4** YOGA IS ONLY FOR WOMEN

The majority of yoga practitioners are indeed women. Perhaps that's why some men are under the impression that yoga is not for them. But yoga is not a discipline that's solely reserved for the fairer sex; anyone can reap the benefits of this body-and-mind exercise. Take Lawrence Lee for example. The 46-year-old took up Hatha yoga seven years ago to correct his hunched posture. He explains: "Constantly carrying a bag on one shoulder gave me bad posture. After taking up yoga, my body no longer feels stiff and I stand upright now." He dismisses the myth that men can't enjoy yoga, citing B.K.S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, two of the world's most respected yoga teachers as examples.

MYTH #5 YOU DON'T GET A PROPER WORKOUT WITH YOGA

Most people don't immediately associate a heart-pumping workout with yoga; especially since there's usually no pulsating music or energetic movements involved. Actually, yoga is challenging enough to qualify as cardiovascular training. Getting your body to maintain a halfway sit-up for an entire minute is not as easy as it seems.

True Yoga's spokesperson adds: "Depending on the type of yoga you're practising, the sessions can be rigorous. For instance, power yoga is aerobic in nature and gets your adrenaline levels up. Meanwhile, executing postures in an Ashtanga yoga class requires much coordination and flexibility, while high levels of endurance are required in a Vinyasa class."

MYTH #6 YOU CAN'T DO YOGA DURING A MENSTRUAL PERIOD

Practising yoga is actually a great way to prevent and stop menstrual cramps, according to True Yoga's spokesperson. "It also relaxes the mind to take the edge off any mood swings you may experience. Centering and breathing exercises as well as practising grounding poses are recommended."

What you should avoid during this time are inverted poses — where your legs are above your heart — such as the headstand and shoulder stand. Shan Shan adds: "A good instructor will take care to remind you during class what you should or shouldn't do — not all yoga is off-limits!"

YOGA DEFINED

LEARN MORE ABOUT SIX POPULAR FORMS OF YOGA

HATHA YOGA

The oldest and most complete system of yoga, Hatha yoga is the most basic form of yoga which other yoga forms are derived from. Pick up ancient techniques of asanas (postures), pranayama (breathing), mudras (gestures), bandhas (locks), and kriyas (cleansing).

GENTLE YOGA

Gentle yoga is suitable for beginners to yoga who wish to increase their overall flexibility with basic poses and breathing exercises.

YOGA THERAPY

Yoga therapy uses gentle stretching poses and is suitable for beginners and those with sports injuries and health problems such as high blood pressure, asthma and back and neck pain.

HOT YOGA

Hot yoga cleanses your body and involves a series of yoga poses performed in a heated room at 37°C. Hot yoga not only improves circulation, it also helps with weight loss.

YOGALATES

A fusion of Yoga and Pilates, yogalates involves a series of postures that stretches and strengthens core muscle groups to help one achieve a slimmer silhouette.

KRYOGA

Kryoga combines martial arts techniques and yoga postures for a fun and dynamic cardio workout. It builds strength, endurance, flexibility and balance and is suitable for all ages.