

Yoga and You

Yoga can become a tool in your self-care toolbox and can lead to a more balanced lifestyle.

This 5000-year-old science, art and philosophy can offer a more spiritual approach to health and well-being than many other physical activities.

The confusion with yoga can simply be summed up in: What is yoga? And, even with its long history, you may wonder: Is yoga for me?

Let's start with the first question. Familiar yoga classes come under the term Hatha Yoga - a yoga system of physical exercises, breath control, and meditation to create balance and unite opposites. Its design leads to alignment and calmness for your body, mind and spirit. Side benefits include enhanced body functioning, mental focus, and happier daily living. Ultimately you can gain a greater self awareness of the uniqueness of you, opening to your innate intelligence and joy.

The information that follows can help you decide if it is for you.

Let's start with the many benefits. According to NIH*, research has well-documented numerous benefits of yoga practice for a wide variety of populations and conditions. The advantages apply across all stages of the life cycles. They can range from alleviating back pain and muscle stiffness to reducing side effects from medical treatments to supporting healthy pregnancy. Here is a short list:

Improves: flexibility, muscle strength and tone, posture, heart health, circulation, stamina, relationships, eating habits, balance, breathing, energy, vitality, confidence

Decreases: back and neck pain, allergy reactions, sleeping problems, headaches, drug abuse, inability to concentrate, fatigue

Manages and reduces stress response (changes body chemistry, develops coping skills, leads to a more positive outlook on life)

Next, it is good to experiment with the style of yoga, the teacher, the class format, the location, the day and time, the level, and the frequency. Yoga is not a one size fits all situation. You will enrich your experience by investing

attention and resources to find the right fit. Even seasoned practitioners can expand their toolbox with this experimentation.

To get started, here is some basic knowledge.

Styles All styles of yoga are geared to help develop body self-awareness. You will find many styles offered in Lee County: Iyengar, Bikram, Vinyasa, Hot, Flow, Yin, and Kundalini. Each of these has a different approach to suit aging, physical challenge, personal preferences, and adjustments in your life style.

Teachers The best advice I ever got in selecting a teacher is to answer these two questions: Does the teacher have a daily personal practice? and Do you smile during class?

Class Formats Typically yoga classes include postures (asanas), breathing (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana), and often how to live well in the world (yamas and niyamas). The end of class is always a relaxation (savasana) so the body pauses for integration before normal activity. Props are used in most styles of yoga these days. This can include mats, blankets, blocks, straps, bolsters, and chairs. Some places provide them; others require you to bring your own. Quiet music is sometimes played in the background.

Locations Classes are in studios, gyms, churches, fitness centers and personal homes. Generally finding a class near you can create a neighborly effect. However, many other circumstances can override this aspect, such as those discussed next.

Days and Times Class days and times offerings are varied enough that usually you can find something to meet your daily/weekly schedule. As with location, you may alter your desires when you find what works. It is also good to note that the length of classes varies from 90, 60, and 45 minutes.

Level If new to yoga, be sure to seek a beginner's level class. If there is a physical challenge of any kind, be sure the teacher has training to assist you. The important thing is not to overdo in any class, no matter what the

teacher says. Effort coupled with overdoing can lead to strain or just not wanting to go back. Self-responsibility is first.

Frequency Often in the beginning, students take one class a week. Sometimes the classes are offered in blocks of a 4-6 week commitment. With progress and interest, 2-4 times a week becomes typical. Also with progress and time, a home practice evolves naturally, often daily.

Attire and Food Recommended attire is easy-to-move-in clothing that is not too baggy. Buying yoga clothes is not the first step. As for food intake, eating a meal less than an hour before class is not recommended.

Google can provide a wealth of information. This past spring I researched Lee County yoga locations and found 24 businesses offering yoga programs. This does not include places offering one or two classes, or independent yoga teachers.

This wealth of yoga classes and teachers in Lee County reflects the significant impact yoga can have in your daily living. If you feel that something is lacking or not working in your life, yoga can be the next exploration.

Much like any personal endeavor, trial and error does work. Ultimately like everything in life, you are the driver. Trust your own instincts and experiences. The key is to get started.

*NIH (National Institutes of Health) website: www.nih.gov