

Yoga and your health

Yoga student **Heather Millar** explores this ancient system of physical and mental exercise

I am standing on my left leg. My right leg is tucked up, my arms raised over my head, palms flat together. I am gazing into the distance at a fixed spot on the wall, and I am doing my damndest not to fall over. I am performing the Tree pose, a yoga 'asana' which tones the leg muscles and aids in inner balance and poise.

I am one of the thousands of Australians who have lately become yoga converts. What drew me to it was the need to reduce stress in my life and to stretch out the many knots resulting from years spent at desks and computers.

"Stress is such an everyday part of life in Western society," says Melbourne-based yoga instructor Elise Compton. "I think more and more people are looking for ways of reducing stress in their lives and improving their general health and wellbeing."

In fact, many physicians recommend yoga practice as a management tool to patients at risk for heart disease, as well as those with back pain, arthritis, depression and other chronic conditions.

Yoga has seen such a rise in popularity that there is even a daily TV show dedicated to its practice here in Australia.

What is yoga?

"Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning union, yoke or joining," says Compton. "It is a very general term that encompasses many different disciplines, from the purely physical to the purely spiritual."

No one knows exactly when yoga began, but it certainly predates written history. Stone

carvings depicting figures in yoga positions have been found in archeological sites in the Indus Valley (in west India and Pakistan) dating back 5,000 years or more. In ancient times, the desire for greater personal freedom, health and long life, and heightened self-understanding gave birth to this system of physical and mental exercise which has since spread throughout the world.

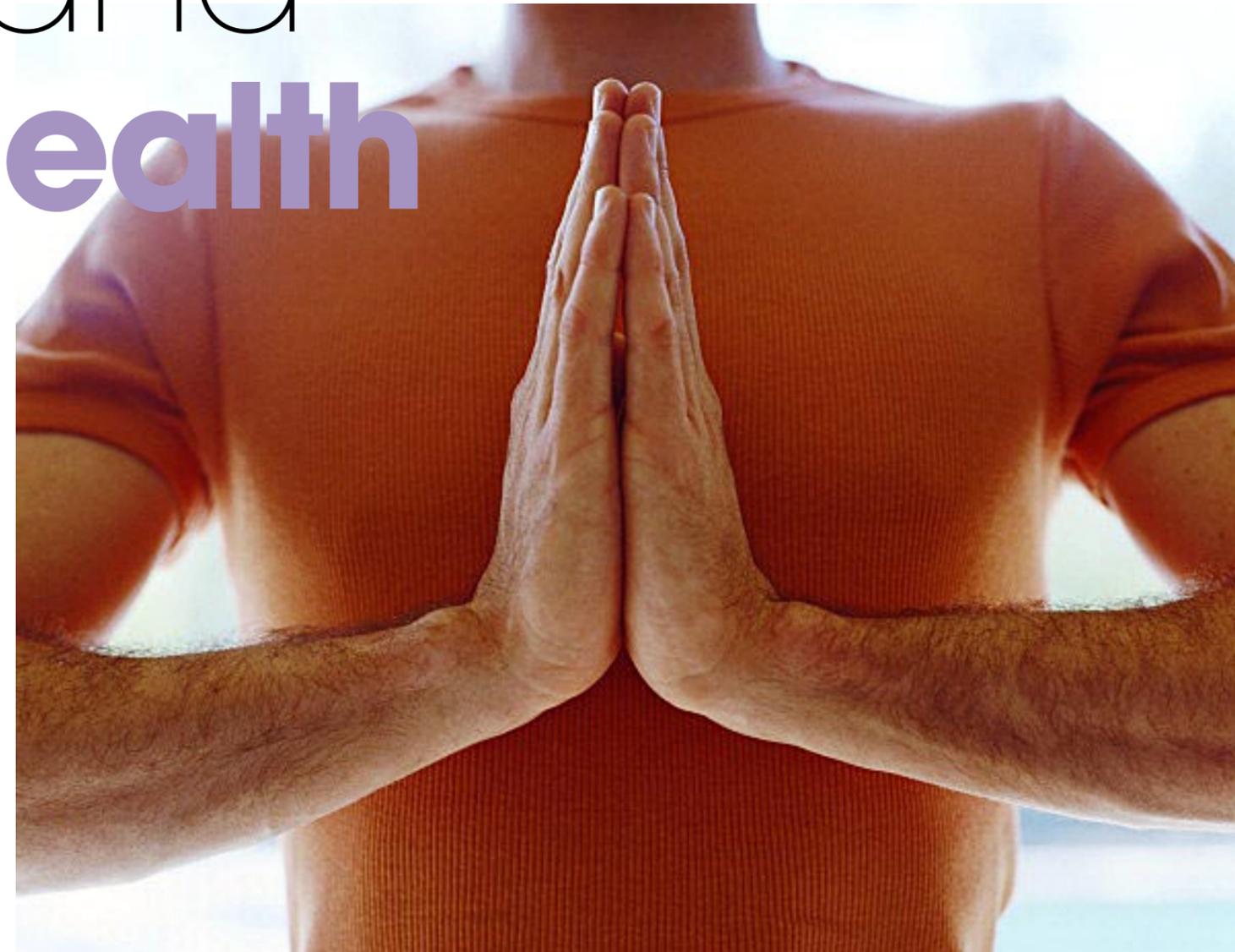
Modern Western yoga classes generally focus more on the physical discipline of yoga, ie. the asanas (postures), along with breathing techniques (pranayama) and meditation.

How does it work?

The exercises of yoga are designed to put pressure on the glandular systems of the body, thereby increasing its efficiency and total health. The body is looked upon as the primary instrument that enables us to work and evolve in the world, and so a yoga

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student treats it with great care and respect. Breathing techniques are based on the concept that breath is the source of life in the body. The yoga student gently increases breath control to improve the health and function of both body and mind. These two systems of exercise and breathing then prepare the body and mind for meditation, and the student finds an easy approach to a



Photography: Getty Images

muscular strength or cardiovascular fitness (although both are possible) but to restore to the body-mind its fundamental state of well-being, ease and vibrant alertness.

Yoga postures work on all dimensions of the body-mind – 'physical' through healing, strengthening, stretching and relaxing the

dimensions of life, establishing calm, concentration, emotional stability and confidence.

Styles of yoga

Although there are many styles of yoga, the differences are usually about emphasis, such as focusing on strict alignment of the body,

asana and pranayama to awaken, experience, and begin to control the subtle energies within oneself. Its object is to use those energies to harmonise body, mind, and emotions, and above all to attune oneself with higher levels of awareness. One unique feature of this system is the use of silent affirmations while in the asanas as a means of working more directly and consciously with the subtle energies to achieve this attunement.

Ashtanga

For those who want a serious workout. Developed by K. Pattabhi Jois, Ashtanga is physically demanding. Participants move through a series of flows, jumping from one posture to another to build strength, flexibility and stamina. It's not for beginners or anyone who's been taking a leisurely approach to fitness.

Bikram

Bikram Choudhury's yoga is hot, so be prepared to sweat! The class is held in a room where the thermostat is cranked up high. A series of 26 asanas designed to warm and stretch muscles, ligaments and tendons are performed.

Iyengar

B.K.S. Iyengar is one of the best-known yoga teachers and the creator of one of the most popular styles of yoga in the world. His style of yoga is noted for great attention to detail and the precise alignment of postures, as well as the use of props such as blocks and belts.

Kundalini

Kundalini yoga in the tradition of Yogi Bhajan, who brought the style to the West in 1969, focuses on the controlled release of Kundalini energy. The practice involves classic poses, breath, coordination of breath and movement, and meditation.

Sivananda

Sivananda is one of the world's largest schools of yoga. Developed by Vishnu-devananda and named for his teacher, Sivananda yoga follows a set structure that includes pranayama, classic asanas, and relaxation.

Viniyoga

Developed by Sri. T. Krishnamacharya, teacher of contemporary masters B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois and Indra Devi, and continued by his son, T.K.V. Desikachar. Key characteristics of the asana practice are the

skeletal, muscular, cardiovascular, digestive, glandular, and nervous systems; 'mental', through the cultivation of a quiet and peaceful mind, alertness, and concentration; and 'spiritual' by way of preparation for meditation and cultivation of inner strength.

On a physical level yoga postures stimulate the glands, organs, muscles and nerves. Muscle tightness is quickly relieved and circulation and digestion improve. Stress-related symptoms like poor sleep, fatigue, muscle spasms and anxiety are improved. Through continued practice, yoga postures can have a profound effect on the inner

coordination of breath and movement, holding the postures, or the flow from one posture to another. All of the styles share a common lineage. In fact, the founders of three major styles – Astanga, Iyengar and Viniyoga – were all students of Krishnamacharya, a famous teacher at the Yoga Institute at the Mysore Palace in India. No style is better than another; it's simply a matter of personal preference. Here are some of the main styles of yoga.

Ananda

Ananda yoga is a classical style that uses

body, mind & spirit



Careful integration of the flow of breath with movement of the spine. Function is stressed over form. Practices may also include pranayama, meditation, reflection, study and other classic elements.

Who can do yoga?

Yoga is suitable for most adults of any age or physical condition. Because of the non-strenuous nature of yoga, even those with physical limitations can find a beneficial routine.

Strenuous yoga exercises should be avoided by women during menstruation, pregnant women in their first trimester and nursing mothers.

How often should you practise?

Practising yoga 30 minutes a day helps to dissipate stress, increase stamina and strengthen the body and will. The exercise, breathing and meditation techniques contribute to improved physical and mental health and well-being.

"Just making yoga part of your regular daily routine for 20 or 30 minutes can be beneficial," says Compton.

"But even if you don't practice it daily, you can still gain benefits. Even those who come in (to yoga class) once a week see a difference." VH

Depression, yoga and self-help

Australians are suspicious of anti-depressant medication and therapy and prefer self-help remedies such as yoga and talking with the family, according to a new survey of attitudes researched by national depression initiative Beyond Blue.

The survey of 900 random Australians also showed that depression was the most popular

health topic researched on the Internet.

The survey, reported in the Medical Journal of Australia, found that support from family and friends, exercise and yoga were believed to be the most helpful treatments for depression the survey found, followed by psychotherapy.

Many people who become depressed each year also explored other self-help remedies such

as acupuncture, massage and relaxation.

However, the study noted that none of the remedies studied was as good as seeking professional help.

For more information on depression, go to the Beyond Blue website at www.beyondblue.org.au or call (03) 9810 6100.

Photography: Getty Images

PMT? Menopause?

If you're feeling tired or stressed, or you've had enough of those PMT symptoms such as mood swings or menopausal hot flushes, read on. Swisse Women's Ultivite may be your answer.

Swisse Women's Ultivite is a drug free Multivitamin Antioxidant formula that can be effective in relieving the symptoms of menopause and PMT. In most cases, you can experience relief from hot flushes, mood swings and menstrual cramps very quickly. "Nutritional deficiencies may be the cause of many health issues or ailments that make us feel miserable or unwell. That's where the Swisse formulae have proven successful. It provides vitamins, minerals and antioxidants important so that our body has every chance to function properly," said Ms Eva Kierzkowska from Swisse's Research & Development Department. So Swisse is great for relieving PMT and menopause symptoms and promoting wellbeing.

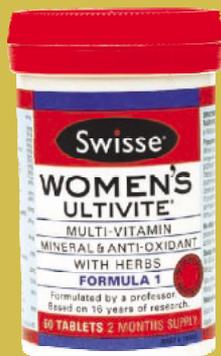
Swisse Women's & Men's Ultivite has been developed by an Australian and based on over 20 years of worldwide research. Millions of Swisse tablets are taken by Australians every month, and the Swisse brand is one of the most highly recommended.

Swisse is the preferred Multivitamin Antioxidant of the Australian Cricket Team, and one of the world's only brands that is updated regularly to keep remain at the forefront of new discoveries. Available at over 5000 Health Stores and Pharmacies throughout Australia.

For full list of ingredients, see product label.

Use only as directed and see your healthcare professional if symptoms persist.

Questions? Comments? Freecall 1800 670 680, or www.swisse.com.au.



Tired? Stressed?!



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