



## **Lifespan Cardiovascular Institute**

Rhode Island Hospital • The Miriam Hospital  
Newport Hospital

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**The Center for Cardiac Fitness  
Cardiac Rehab Program  
The Miriam Hospital**

# **Yoga for Cardiac Rehabilitation**

Yoga originated in India over 4000 years ago. In recent decades the practice of yoga has enjoyed a rising popularity in Western cultures. The most widely practiced forms are Hatha (or forceful) yoga, Raja (or classical) yoga. Both Hatha and Raja yoga emphasizes specific postures, breathe control, concentration, and meditation. In the Western world, Hatha yoga is the most commonly practiced.

The advantages of yoga run broad and deep. In the United States specifically, yoga is practiced to alleviate stress, improved health and increase fitness. What makes it so attractive is the fact that yoga is economical, has no significant side effects, yet the lifestyle benefits are substantial. It's safe, easy to learn and even the elderly and disable can practice yoga.

Specific benefits for cardiac patients have been studied, but most recently have been compiled and reviewed. Reductions in risk factors for cardiovascular disease have been pronounced with the introduction and practice of yoga for as little as 4 weeks to 12 months. Studies have shown

an improvement in insulin resistance after the practice of yoga. Also cholesterol and low-density lipoproteins (LDL) were reduced; while the high-density (HDL) levels were increased. Blood pressure has been most extensively studied, and the results show marked improvement in blood pressure after as little as 30 days of yoga practice.



Yoga practice consists of meditation, deep breathing and gentle stretching. We will be practicing all of these techniques today.

Hope you enjoy yoga as much as I do.

## Yoga could boost heart health!

The history of yoga stretches back as far as ancient India, when people practiced it to increase their tranquility and spiritual insight. Today, many Americans enjoy it to help them relax and increase their flexibility — and may even improve their heart health. However, yoga does not count towards physical activity requirements of 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity per week.

Traditional yoga is done by slowly stretching the body into a variety of poses while focusing on breathing and meditation. “Yoga is designed to bring about increased physical, mental and emotional well-being,” said M. Mala Cunningham, Ph.D., counseling psychologist and founder of Cardiac Yoga. “Hand in hand with leading a heart-healthy lifestyle, it really is possible for a yoga-based model to help prevent or reverse [heart disease](#). It may not completely reverse it, but you will definitely see benefits.”

### AHA Recommendation for Physical Activity

For overall health benefits to the heart, lungs and circulation, perform any moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic activity using the following

guidelines:

- Get the equivalent of at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity (2 hours and 30 minutes) each week.
- You can incorporate your weekly physical activity with 30 minutes a day on at least five days a week.
- Physical activity should be performed in episodes of at least 10 minutes, and preferably, it should be spread throughout the week.
- Include flexibility and stretching exercises.
- Include muscle strengthening activity at least two days each week.

Yoga can be used to improve heart health as a preventive measure or after facing a cardiac event, said Cunningham, who has taught yoga for 40 years and is also president of Positive Health Solutions.

### **Why yoga?**

Thinking prevention? As part of an overall healthy lifestyle, Cunningham said yoga can help lower blood pressure, increase lung capacity, respiratory function and heart rate, and boost circulation and muscle tone. It can also improve your overall well-being while offering strength-building benefits.

Yoga also has proven benefits for those who have faced [cardiac arrest](#), [heart attack](#) or other [heart event](#), according to Cunningham. “The acute emotional stress of such an event certainly has a significant and adverse effect on the heart,” she said. “That’s where yoga can be a tremendous benefit to manage the stress.” For example, Cunningham said that half of [bypass surgery](#) patients go through depression, facing emotions ranging from anxiety to grieving. “All these things come into play when you’ve got a potentially chronic disease to manage for the rest of your life.”

The calming benefits of yoga may help with that — and you may see benefits right away. After your first yoga class, your [blood pressure](#) will likely be lower, you’ll be relaxed and you’ll feel better, Cunningham said.

Long-term, sustained yoga may play a role in improving overall health, according to Cunningham.

“The more energy you put into it, the more you’re going to get out of it,” she said. “After 12 weeks, you may see a dramatic increase in exercise functionality, and blood pressure and [cholesterol levels](#) may decrease.”

If you have heart disease, [diabetes](#) or are [obese](#), check with your doctor before

starting a yoga program. “I highly recommend going to a qualified and trained cardiac medical yoga instructor,” Cunningham said. To find an instructor in your area, check with your local cardiac rehab center or visit [cardiacyoga.com](http://cardiacyoga.com).

The American Heart Association

*This content was last reviewed on 03/22/2013.*

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## MINDFULNESS

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State of being fully conscious in the present moment and aware of one’s emotions, thoughts, bodily sensations and surrounding environment. Observing these thoughts and qualities without judgment.

A few ways to bring mindfulness into your life:

1. Meditation
2. Breathing
3. Body Scanning
4. Mindful moment practice

### Benefits of Mindfulness

Lowering stress levels – hormones

Reducing blood pressure

Boosting immune system

Shown to mitigate depression/anxiety/ADHD

Improves concentration

Decreases age related cognitive decline

Improves sleep

A 2011 study showed that mindfulness meditation can actually change the structure of your brain. With eight weeks of Mindfulness-Based stress reduction (MBSR) participants had growth in the brain in areas associated with learning, memory and emotional regulation. On top of that the area

associated with stress/fear/anxiety was shown to have a reduction in volume. Additionally, the participants reported an improvement in their psychological well-being.

## **How to start Meditating? It's easy**

- 1. Set aside some time and find a quiet space (it does not need to be free of noise), find a place to sit floor or chair where your body feels relaxed.**
- 2. Observe the present moment- aim to pay attention to the moment and thoughts that arise without judgment. Bring your attention to your breath focus on inhale then exhale; attempt over a few moments to deepen your breath.**
- 3. Let judgment roll by-when judgment arises just let it go.**
- 4. Attention may wander- when it does just bring your attention back to the present moment without judgment.**
- 5. Be kind to your wandering mind- you will build your attention over time.**

Resources:

[www.Mindfulness.org](http://www.Mindfulness.org)

Headspace App- 10 minute guided meditation app, free 10 day trial available

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center- free guided meditations

[www.mindfulnessri.org](http://www.mindfulnessri.org) RI Community of Mindfulness

[www.mindbodygreen.com](http://www.mindbodygreen.com) Meditation courses available