



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Yoga's Many Health Benefits Extend Directly to the Brain

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we explore the brain health benefits of yoga.***

Yoga, the spiritual discipline devoted to bringing the body and mind into harmony, has long been recognized as a stress reliever and great way to reduce anxiety and depression. It is actually a combination of four components: postures, breathing practices, deep relaxation, and meditation that can transform your brain and body health on many different levels.

But did you know that yoga has a direct benefit on the physiological matter of benefit to the brain itself? According to a [Harvard Health report](#), brain cells make new connections during a session of yoga, and changes occur in the structure of the brain. Studies using brain imaging and MRI showed that people who did yoga regularly had a thicker cerebral cortex and hippocampus compared with those who don't do yoga. The cerebral cortex is responsible for information processing, while the hippocampus is vital in learning and memory.

Like most types of exercise, yoga lowers the levels of stress hormones and boosts endorphins, the body's feel-good chemicals. But yoga goes a step further, elevating levels of gamma-aminobutyric acid, associated with mood enhancement and anxiety reduction.

Speaking of decreasing the implications of brain illness, looking at interventions to support reduction of depression and anxiety symptoms, a review of 15 studies published in the journal *Aging and Mental Health* analyzed the effects of several relaxation techniques on depression and anxiety in older adults. Of yoga, massage therapy, progressive muscle relaxation, stress management and listening to music, yoga and music were deemed the most effective. Yoga, the review concluded, had the longest-lasting effect.

Another study published in the journal *Brain Plasticity* reviewed 11 separate studies that explored the effects of yoga practice on brain performance. The study found that yoga has a

positive effect on the hippocampus, amygdala, and cingulate and prefrontal cortexes, responsible for increasing performance of information processing, memory and emotional regulation.

Following are some of yoga's other health benefits research has discovered:

- **POSITIVE BODY IMAGE.** Yoga focuses attention inward, developing breath and strength of mind and body. Studies have shown those who practice yoga are less critical of their bodies.
- **MINDFUL EATING.** Yoga has been shown to increase mindfulness in other areas of life. Practitioners are more aware of how their body feels and are more apt to savor their food.
- **GREATER EXERCISE CAPACITY.** Researchers followed a group of sedentary adults who had not practiced yoga. After eight weeks of yoga at least twice per week, the adults had greater muscle strength, endurance, flexibility, and cardio-respiratory fitness.
- **BLOOD PRESSURE GAINS.** Several small studies showed yoga lowered blood pressure among those who have hypertension.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

There are several styles of yoga, based on asanas, or different postures. Which one is right for you?

- **POWER YOGA.** Power yoga connects movement with breath in a set sequence of postures. The focus is on moving and creating heat within the body. Ashtanga is a type of power yoga.
- **JIVAMUKTI.** Jivamukti is similar to power yoga but incorporates chanting, meditation and singing readings.
- **IYENGAR.** The Iyengar flow emphasizes stillness and each posture's form, promoting physical alignment and serenity. Straps, blocks, and bolsters aid those who are unable to perform a posture by themselves.
- **BIKRAM.** Also called hot yoga, Bikram hopes to make you sweat. Classes are held in rooms of about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. There are 26 ordered postures in Bikram.
- **KUNDALINI.** Kundalini focuses on moving energy through the body with the use of rapid breathing, postures, chanting and meditation.
- **KRIPALU.** Kripalu is also called gentle yoga. Its stages of willful practice, willful surrender and meditation in motion promotes spiritual healing. Postures tone muscles, improve blood flow and energize the mind.

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing

- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).