



Yoga for Weight Loss

In unexpected ways, yoga can help you lose weight.

by Timothy McCall, MD

Yoga is so much more than a weight-loss program, but it has helped many people shed extra pounds, even some who have spent years trying to slim down in other ways without success. Studies show that a complete yoga program—*asana*, breathing techniques, and meditation—can peel off the pounds. How does yoga do it? Well, the most obvious explanation is all the calories burned practicing *asana*, especially in vigorous yoga classes. Still, many students lose weight even when their yoga practice is gentle and doesn't burn that many calories.

Less Stress: A less obvious explanation is that yoga helps reduce stress. In response to stress, levels of the hormone cortisol rise; for people who continue to worry, those levels can stay high. Elevated cortisol levels not only stimulate eating, they ensure that any additional calories are efficiently converted to fat. Worse, under the influence of cortisol, that fat tends to get deposited in the abdomen, a particularly unhealthy place. Big bellies are linked to insulin resistance—a precursor to Type 2 (adult-onset) diabetes—and heart disease. By combating stress, yoga helps normalize cortisol levels.

More Awareness: The regular practice of yoga also boosts your ability to feel what's going on inside your body. This awareness helps you detect not only whether, say, your hamstring is tight but also whether your stomach is already full. Many people with weight problems have little awareness of their hunger and continue indulging long after they're sated. Besides having greater bodily awareness, people who practice yoga learn to examine their emotions—whether it's fear keeping them from doing a handstand or loneliness prompting late-night trips to the fridge. Yoga teaches that you are not your emotions and that you don't always need to act on them.

Better Concentration: If you struggle with overeating, try paying closer attention to your eating habits—even if you can't alter them right now. If you find yourself about to eat when you're not really hungry, assess the emotions that may be fueling your appetite. It's also useful to eliminate distractions. Resist the temptation to read, watch TV, listen to music, or talk with a friend while you eat. Instead try to make your meal a meditation, tuning into the taste, texture, and

smell of the food. If you find yourself slipping into thought, just notice that and return your attention to the food and your body's response to it.

Bigger Picture: One final piece of advice: Don't get wrapped up in all the hype about diets. Instead of adopting a short-term strategy to drop a few pounds (which may backfire and result in twice the weight gain), focus on finding a balanced approach to eating and exercise that you can enjoy and that can keep you healthy over the long haul.



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