Can Yoga Help Keep Blood Sugar Levels in Check?

by AFRA WILLMORE

Yoga for Diabetes: Does Yoga Help Diabetics?

When you think of ways to treat diabetes it's natural to think firstly of medical options, since so many people with type 2 diabetes take one form of prescription drug or another.

Of course, there are also those who manage their condition with changes to their diet, by losing weight and by increasing exercise levels — but did you know you can also improve blood glucose levels with yoga?

Data from several studies have found that yoga can have a positive effect on wellbeing, posture and mobility, and can lower blood pressure and reduce stress-related hyperglycemia, or high blood sugar.

Some people believe it can also prevent type 2 diabetes from developing if yoga is started after a diagnosis of prediabetes.

Yoga is ancient; it is believed to originate from India some 5000 years ago. There are many types of yoga, but fundamentally all disciplines involve mental, physical and spiritual aspects and aim to coordinate the breath, mind and body to help relaxation and a sense of inner peace.

It involves learning breathing techniques, meditation and body postures known as asanas, but don't worry — they don't all involve standing on one leg or contorting your body in any way! Because there are so many methods practiced, yoga in some form is suitable for all levels of fitness and mobility

Most people who train regularly claim a number of improvements to their lifestyle, ranging from better sleep, reduced anxiety, improved posture, strength and stamina through to lower blood glucose levels and improved digestion, circulation, and immunity.

Can Yoga Help With Diabetes? Yoga and Diabetes Benefits

It's thought that yoga practiced regularly also enhances the efficiency of neurological, respiratory and endocrine organs — the last of these relates to diabetes.

The endocrine system consists of a number of different glands which secrete hormones that dictate how cells and organs behave. The hormones produced by the endocrine system help the body to regulate growth, sexual function, mood, and metabolism.

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The pancreas is arguably the most vital part of the endocrine system in relation to diabetes, as it is responsible for secreting the hormones insulin and glucagon which respectively make glucose and fatty acids available for cells to use for energy.

There are yoga postures that stretch the pancreas, which can help encourage the production of insulin-producing beta cells. A few of the specific asanas that practitioners recommend for diabetics are those that bring about a stretch and twist in that region of the spine (lower thoracic and upper lumbar) where the pancreas is located behind the stomach.

Such techniques (for those of you already practicing or considering taking up yoga) are vakrasan, ardh-matsyndrasan, and dhanurasan (bow pose). These are believed to increase the blood supply, massage the organs, activate cells and thereby cause an increase in all its secretions, including insulin.

Yoga asanas such as the corpse pose, bridge pose, child pose, and yoga nidra are all helpful in controlling hypertension which in turn could help lower blood glucose.

Like other forms of exercise, yoga also increases glucose uptake by the cells in your muscles, which in turn helps to lower blood sugar levels. As a bonus, this will also improve circulation which could help prevent diabetic neuropathy and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. The practice might also help you lose weight, which in some cases can have a positive effect on blood glucose levels.

Getting Started: Easy Yoga for Diabetics

Now before you rush out and buy yoga pants, a reminder that before starting any new exercise regime it is wise to check with your doctor that it is suitable for you — especially if you have other health issues apart from diabetes.

You should also continue with your current diabetes treatment plan, consulting with your healthcare team regularly to monitor any changes in blood glucose levels before making any changes to drug dosage.

You can buy DVDs in stores and online, or watch videos online which have been made especially for those with diabetes, featuring the specific postures to gain maximum benefit to the endocrine system and for reducing stress-related hyperglycemia.

However, if you are a complete beginner it is probably wise to start training with a qualified and certified practitioner, being sure to mention your diabetes and other health concerns before starting any practice. Many yoga teachers recommend working one-to-one with an instructor, although more and more offer training in a class format.

There are a number of organizations that can help you find a teacher and offer advice on what to look for in a yogi, including the International Yoga Federation, The Yoga Alliance and The International Association of Yoga Therapists.

Even if you find yoga makes no significant difference to your blood sugar levels you may find it offers other benefits to your general health and well being.

It’s not generally an expensive pastime and even if you don’t feel stressed, inflexible or have reduced mobility at this stage of your life, practices and postures learned now may help in later life.