

No age limit to enjoying benefits of yoga

By Danielle Leonard

With yoga growing in popularity across North America, the practice is increasingly recognized for many health benefits.

Touted for its power to improve flexibility, strengthen bone mass, and relieve tension, it seems an antidote to the symptoms of aging. Thanks to its unique combination of holding poses (called asanas), breath and meditation, the practice appears to slow the aging process. An elixir of youth? Not likely, but perhaps it's the next best thing.

Although images of yogis accomplishing feats of flexibility may act as a deterrent to starting a yoga practice (particularly if the act of getting out of bed is accompanied by stiffness), the reality is that any age is a good time to start. Sofia Jambor, a manual osteopathic therapist and yoga instructor in Oakville, Ontario says that people in their 40s and 50s are well suited to yoga, and may in fact reap its greatest rewards.

Typically, by middle age the body has lost the variety of movement once enjoyed during more youthful years. Many have long settled into daily routines, performing the same tasks day after day. Whether it's typing at a desk or following an unchanged exercise regimen, the body's mobility becomes increasingly limited and inevitably results in less flexibility.

"Yoga reminds the body of its range of motion, which is often cut short through repetitive movements made every day for years," explains Jambor.

Asanas, or poses, are considered one of the major tools of yoga that position the body in

various postures for a certain length of time. A regular yoga practice includes a selection of poses that include standing, sitting, forward bends, twists, inversions, back bends and lying down - all of which recruit deeper muscles that tend to be neglected with age.

A unique feature of yoga is that it requires the body to bear its own weight, often through the arms and upper body. An alternative to the more traditional route of lifting weights, it has been shown to improve bone density - an important benefit considering that men and women begin to lose bone mass in their mid-30s. Furthermore, by the time women approach menopause, their risk of osteoporosis accelerates along with the likelihood of experiencing a fracture. According to a recent study on the effects of yogasanas on osteoporosis postmenopausal women, bone mass density improved after regular yoga practice for six months.

Proponents of yoga are quick to emphasize that the poses, alone, are not enough to differentiate it from other forms of exercise. A key difference between yoga and other workout routines is its focus on breath, also referred to as pranayama.

"Movement with breath adds so much value in yoga practice to find space and for receiving movement and letting go of resistance," says Jambor who has observed the negative effects that stress has on the physical and mental states of her patients and students.

"Our body is highly related to emotional and mental states," explains Jambor. "A lot of us don't have a way or time to process our experiences." Yoga offers a meditative com-

ponent that encourages those who practice to release the tensions that, when built up over time, can hinder the body's ability to operate optimally and recover from injuries. While this slower pace of yoga may cause a 20-year-old to twitch with impatience, it is likely to appeal to older students who don't mind extra downtime.

"Those in middle age and older have the maturity and patience to start a yoga practice," says Jambor. "Some of the best teachers I know found it in their 40s and 50s." While yoga remains a strictly physical form of exercise for many North Americans, the opportunity is there for inner reflection and self-awareness. These are qualities that Jambor believes are ripe for older students who are less concerned with the frantic chasing of goals, and more at peace with who and where they are now.

For anyone interested in starting a yoga practice, Jambor emphasizes the importance of self-care. One of the main principles of yoga, she explains, is its focus on non-harming and warns against challenging one's body to extreme movement. As tempting as it may be to keep up with the person on the next mat over, Jambor advises focusing on one's own capabilities and comfort level.

Beginning a new exercise regimen at any age can be a challenge. The aches and stiffness that often accompany middle age don't make it any easier. Yoga, fortunately, is beneficial to anyone willing to try. When asked how someone knows yoga is a good fit, Jambor explained, "Yoga finds you when you need it the most." 