

# Yoga Is More Than Stretching

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Yoga is more than stretching. Yes, yoga lengthens muscles to increase flexibility, suppleness and agility. And yes, yoga can help you to develop and maintain your body's full potential in terms of range of motion. But yoga is also a total body workout that increases aerobic capacity, builds strength and promotes endurance. Runners who use yoga to cross train can increase their stamina, develop focus, reduce injuries and enjoy running even more.

## Yoga Is A Workout

If you have never done a Sun Salutation (*Surya Namasara*) or held Triangle pose (*Trikonasana*) for 2 or 3 minutes, you may question whether or not yoga can be a workout. Holding a yoga pose isn't as easy as it may look! (Try standing on your head for a few minutes or balancing on one leg and you may get the idea.) A good yoga practice is active yet relaxing and includes physical movements that purposely activate the autonomic nervous system. Specifically, yoga stimulates the sympathetic nervous system (i.e., *fight or flight*) while drawing upon the body's natural restorative mechanisms (i.e., parasympathetic nervous system) to train the body to work to its optimal physical, physiological and biochemical capacity. These are the same systems that allow you to relax and enjoy a good run.

Yoga poses, called *asanas*, require muscle strength, breath control and focus. This is not unlike running:

## *Asanas* for Runners



### **Trikonasana** (Triangle pose)

- Feet 3-4' apart with one foot 90° and the other 45°
- Plant feet firmly and activate thighs and kneecaps
- Extend arms away from each other
- Extend both sides of the torso evenly

**Benefits:** Stretches and tones legs, hips, buttocks, pelvis and thighs.



### **Adho Mukha Svanasana** (Downward Facing Dog)

- Hands shoulder width apart and feet hip width apart
- Activate quadriceps to release hamstrings
- Lengthen through the spine

**Benefits:** Removes leg fatigue and pain. Reduces tension in the heels. Stretches hamstrings and shoulders.

physical exertion that involves breathing methods followed by physical and physiological recovery. Unlike running, however, *asanas* access the entire body, including small muscle groups that support and stabilize the skeletal system. The result is improvements in overall muscle function as well as changes in flexibility, strength and stamina.

### More than Stretching

Yoga is a time-honored practice that incorporates strengthening, breathing, stretching and balance. It differs from stretching in its emphasis on mental awareness in the performance of physical actions. Stretching involves reaching for your toes, whereas yoga involves a focused attention to the interplay between the body and mind in performing this “stretch.” Yoga also uses the breath to relax the muscles and quiet the mind in order to achieve maximum benefit and performance.

### The Stretching Controversy

Most runners know that stretching is good for preventing injury and improving performance. But many experts (and runners) disagree on the benefits and dangers of stretching. In fact, improper stretching is a leading cause of injuries among runners. These injuries are particularly likely when muscles are either too cold or too hot. Stretching when the muscles are cold can tear muscle fibers and tendons by pulling them past their set point. Stretching when the body is too hot can

elongate ligaments and fascial tissues and weaken their ability support the muscles. Yoga addresses this controversy by encouraging sequences of poses that warm the body prior to stretching and counterbalancing stretches with strength building.

In this way, yoga is unique in its ability to strengthen muscles while they are lengthening. Dr. Stephen Rice, a spokesman for the American College of Sports Medicine describes yoga as the “ultimate stretching” because long holds in yoga poses teach your muscles to relax (i.e., inhibit stretch reflexes that contract the muscles) and allow them to lengthen more effectively. Dr. Timothy McCall, medical director for the *Yoga Journal* magazine, notes that most people who begin yoga build strength along with flexibility.

More importantly, the practice of yoga focuses your mind on the subtle qualities of your body and breath to increase your awareness. This increased awareness can allow you to recognize imbalances that are caused by sport-specific workouts. Most yoga styles also provide exercises that can address these imbalances. When you practice yoga regularly, you develop a greater understanding of the body and how it works. This can allow you to listen and respond to messages that the body sends to you both during and after a run. Your body’s “intuition” can then help you to avoid injuries and get the most out of your running. And *that* is what yoga offers beyond stretching.

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