

# Yoga for Runners

*By Jennifer Daly*

Yoga is perfect cross-training for runners. Yoga strengthens and lengthens the muscles that stabilize the skeleton so you can run faster and minimize injuries. Yoga also cultivates balance, symmetry and alignment to prevent and heal injuries from training or overuse. Yogic breathing techniques soothe the nervous system and calm the mind so that you can relax and burn energy more efficiently. And, through regular yoga practice, you can calm the inner chatter and enjoy your run instead of thinking, “I’ve got to win” or “I’ve got to get through this.” So, if you want to improve fitness, increase aerobic capacity, prevent or heal injuries, or revitalize after training or competition, then yoga is for you.

## What is Yoga?

Yoga is a 5,000-year-old system for conditioning the body and calming the mind. The word *yoga* comes from the Sanskrit root *yug* which means to harness or yoke. This “yoking” refers to a coming together of experiences: mind, body and spirit. It is not a religion. From a yogic point of view, everyone is doing yoga insofar as everyone is seeking the pleasure in realizing our full mental, physical and spiritual potential.

The practice of yoga involves the performance of physical exercises or poses, called *asanas*, that require stretches, counter stretches, and resistances. Yoga *asanas* align your skin, flesh, and muscles with your skeleton to improve health, appearance, and mental alertness. Performing *asanas* increases your understanding of your body and how it works. Through a regular yoga practice, you learn your body’s capabilities, rhythms, and limitations; you learn to manage your resources and economize your energy. This knowledge contributes to a sense of strength, effectiveness and satisfaction with your self and your body.

Yoga is extremely popular these days, with an estimated 16 to 20 million practitioners in the U.S. alone. Most yoga classes emphasize *asanas* and breathing exercises, called *pranayama*, for health and well-being. Classes that focus on the physical aspects of yoga are referred to as *hatha* yoga. Classes that include the physical practice of *asanas*, as well as instruction in meditation, philosophy, ethics and lifestyle, are called *classical* yoga.

## Iyengar Yoga

I teach a classical yoga approach that is based on the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar (pronounced EYE-yen-gar). Iyengar yoga emphasizes anatomical alignment and the ways in which this alignment can affect the mind, body and physiology. In Iyengar yoga, we believe that optimal physical alignment allows the muscular-skeletal system to strengthen and relax. This, in turn, allows the nervous system to calm and the mind to quiet. The result is a sense of healthiness, harmony, and well-being.

Iyengar yoga teachers instruct you in ways to perform yoga poses so that you can maximize physical benefits and minimize injuries. Iyengar teachers are

specifically trained in the use of props, such as blankets, blocks, straps and chairs, to support the body and address physical limitations. These props allow you to perform the postures with relative comfort and ease. This reduces stress and draws upon the responses of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) to relax and lengthen your muscles. Iyengar students hold poses for longer times so that you can reach remote layers of the body and change longstanding patterns of alignment. This deep physical exploration also stretches the mind beyond its usual, externally-focused limits to consider new patterns and possibilities. In Iyengar classes, beginning students perform simple stretches and standing poses until they build strength and flexibility. Advanced *asanas* like pretzel twists and backbends can then be performed to provide additional challenges.

## Benefits for Runners

You don’t have to be able to twist into a pretzel or bend over backwards to benefit from yoga. Yoga is for any runner who wants to feel better and treat his or her body well. Here are just a few of the benefits of yoga for runners.

Improved Performance. If your muscles are off-balance, each step you take forces some muscles to work harder than others. Over time, some muscles become tighter and less efficient than others. The result is reduced muscular-skeletal integration and decreased efficiency in your running stride. Yoga allows you to recognize these imbalances and increase symmetry in all of your muscle groups. Yoga also teaches you ways to lengthen and stretch your muscles so that they can be more responsive and supple when you run. This suppleness can increase range of motion, improve shock absorption and help you to get the most out of every step.

Increased Capacity. Yoga is unique in its ability to strengthen muscles as they are lengthened. Research shows that strong, lean muscles are more effective in using oxygen, a variable that is crucial for running performance and endurance. Yogic breathing techniques and poses teach you how to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system while drawing upon PNS responses to relax your entire body. Most runners know that if you run in a contracted state—tight muscles, shallow breathing and chronic pain—then your body is less efficient and needs more energy. When you are able to relax and enjoy your stride, you maximize your aerobic capacity by increasing the flow of oxygen-rich blood to working muscles. Yoga *asanas* teach you to find this sympathetic/parasympathetic “zone” through the consistent and systematic coordination of your body and breath.

Injury Prevention or Rehabilitation. Running is a weight bearing activity that is excellent for building and maintaining bone mass. It also places great stress on joints, muscles and tendons. Damage is often the result of imbalances and misalignments that resonate throughout the body. For example, tight external hip rotators (i.e., obturator externus and internus, gemellus superior and inferior, piriformis, quadratus femoris) can pull on your sacrum and destabilize the sacroiliac joint to cause pain or discomfort in the lower spine. Lower back pain shifts the body’s forward motion and puts strain on the ligaments in the knees, ankle joints and hamstring muscles. Strains and injuries can result. Yoga prevents injuries by addressing these imbalances and increasing range of motion. A gentle yet consistent yoga

practice can also restore strength and stability to injured muscles and tendons.

Recovery. Yoga's internal focus centers your attention on recovering from running and other physical activities. Gentle stretches and restorative poses trigger the brain to produce chemicals that foster relaxation and healing. These chemicals are produced by the PNS to repair stresses caused by exertion and restore your body's equilibrium. Yoga *asanas* that involve muscle relaxation, reclining or head-down positions, and exhalation all activate PNS processes and contribute to active recovery. Many poses, such as inversions (feet elevated) and twists, are particularly effective at increasing the flow of body fluids and removing waste products from the muscles and tissues. In this way, yoga can be like a good night's sleep in its ability to refresh and restore your body after a run.

I hope that I have made a convincing case for including yoga in your running program. Yoga can help you to increase energy and improve your running economy. It can also reduce and prevent injuries that may disrupt your life and your training. Yoga can restore your body and allow you to cultivate the mental focus that running demands. Most importantly, yoga can help you to build a relationship of comfort and ease with your body and yourself. Bringing your mind and body into balance can then allow you to enjoy running for a years to come.

*Jennifer Daly is a runner who has practiced yoga for over 15 years. She is a registered yoga instructor (RYT) with the National Yoga Alliance and she has studied yoga with nationally-recognized teachers, including John Schumacher, Aadil Palkhivala, Dean Lerner, Roger Cole, Beryl Bender Birch, Sean Corn and Dharma Mittra. She holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and she teaches as an adjunct professor of psychology at The College of William and Mary. Her yoga classes include instructions on anatomical alignment, breath control and mental focus. She teaches on Tuesdays 9-10:30 am and Thursdays 6-7:30 pm at Quarterpath Recreation Center, 202 Quarterpath Road, Williamsburg. She can be reached by phone at (757)784-5104 or email at [jedaly@wm.edu](mailto:jedaly@wm.edu)*