



"I hope that dog doesn't *really* think that I'm a tree."

Yoga, Girl!

A more centered, empowered you is waiting

By Cheryl Fenton

Gwenyth does it. Madonna does it. Even the Chicago Bulls do it. What do these fab people have in common with Buddha and thousands of ancient Indians? They have all stretched their muscles (and their minds) to unlock the secret of yoga.

Don't worry: Yoga doesn't mean you have to bend yourself into a pretzel all in the name of cen-

tering your mind and body. Quite the contrary. Yoga is perfect for people of every level of flexibility and all ages. And even if you only perform simple poses, you still can achieve that centered-mind-and-body thing.

The word yoga is Sanskrit and refers to linking you to what's going on at each moment, along with the profound realization of unity that comes from each thought. Originating in India thousands of years ago, yoga is a holistic, universal approach to personal growth.

The most popular style today, energetic yoga movement or *hatha* yoga, helps you develop suppleness, grace and power in daily activities (so you won't fall over in gym class or whack out at the school dance). Through meditation, stretching, movement, breathing and posture, it emphasizes internal awareness and stability.

"It's important for [young people] to take on the yoga practice because it will instill a sense of what is possible. It will teach them how to maintain the natural movements of the body throughout their adult lives," says Rodney Yee, a yoga instructor who is well-known for his Gaiam yoga videos. "By just giving the [youth] an introduction to yoga at this time in their lives, they will remember—kinetically and emotionally—what's possible, through movement, relaxation and mindfulness."

Intrigued? You're not the only one. "A lot of kids



are coming to me now," says Cindy Barlow, a certified Kripalu yoga teacher and owner of Inner Smile yoga studio in Arlington, Massachusetts. "When I asked why, one senior high school student said, 'I am looking for something good for me that will keep me healthy and help me with stress in my life.'

"They want something that's not competitive because school is always so competitive—who's most popular, am I wearing the right clothes," she continues. "With yoga you can go to a place where you're accepted as who you are. And where your mind, body and spirit are all you need."

So unroll your no-skid yoga mat and your mind, and focus on this powerful practice.

Your Mind Matters

With all the changes your body undergoes during the teenage years, it's no wonder that you're a little freaked out. But yoga can help calm you down and get through those stressful days...no sweat (well, a little sweat—after all, yoga is a workout!).

"There's one relationship that is most important—the one you have

with your body," explains Barlow. "You spend time during yoga with your body, accepting it moment to moment, accepting how you look, and you begin to change your approach to yourself. When you're a teenager, your body is changing and you compare yourself to everyone and feel lacking. Having a time to rethink those thoughts through meditation, you begin to be nicer to yourself."

According to Thia Luby, a nationally known yoga teacher and author of *Yoga for Teens*, the changes can be chakra-ing...oops, we mean *shocking*. "The chakras (paths of energy) are developing and becoming more active [during puberty and later teen years]. Imbalances of chakras, body chemistry and physiology often show up in rebellion and mood swings," she writes.

"Regular practice of yoga can help you maintain balance in the different chakras and keep the spirit and soul strong and healthy."

Don't expect that yoga will immediately change your life when you do your first downward facing dog pose. But where there's a will, there's a way.

"The first stage is willful practice. That is an important aspect of yoga," says Barlow. "'Will' means showing up for yourself, for your body, for your class. 'Will' helps in holding the postures, which is a good practice for daily life—showing up to life and holding a situation, such as a test in school. You will learn to sustain with inner

Yoga Videos

Here are some of our fave yoga videos (and where-to-buy listings) so you can try it at home. As with any new workout, make sure you take it slow. Many experts recommend you watch the video first so you get a feel for the workout before you try it yourself.

The Method 20/20 Series—Integrated Yoga

A balance of yoga and precision toning techniques. The first segment combines yoga and dance providing the benefits of strengthening and lengthening of the muscles while improving the posture and breathing. In your second workout, feel the isolated stretch of each muscle group while toning and using a towel for resistance. \$19.98; www.currentwellness.com; 800-272-4214

Yoga Journal's Yoga for Beginners

This program is an easy-to-follow approach to hatha yoga, with a complete range of basic moves—warm-up, standing poses, forward bends, seated poses, inverted poses and deep relaxation. Comes with a 52-page companion yoga booklet. 75 minutes. \$15; www.gaiam.com (formerly Living Arts); 800-254-8464

Basic Yoga Workout for Dummies

This video will de-mystify the mystical so that you can experience the fabulous benefits of yoga. Fundamental yoga postures are explained and demonstrated slowly, with an emphasis on breathing. The 12 basic poses are taught, with challenging modifications as you become more advanced. 55 minutes. \$9.99; www.amazon.com

strength without losing yourself. "

And moody PMS and grouchiness? Fuhgeddaboutit. Yoga also balances out the mood swings and eliminates the aches that come along with the hormonal imbalances of becoming a woman. And when you're bothered that Jenny fills out her prom dress a little more than you do, yoga will help you through that insecure time too. "Yoga allows you to develop greater poise, grace and confidence, as well as a more accepting relationship to your body and a positive image of who you are in the world," offers Luby.

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Body Beautiful

It certainly isn't all in your mind. Your physical body will see amazing changes once you begin a yoga regimen.

Menstruation. Cramps begone! Yoga posture works for the endocrine system, helping with that pesky monthly muscle madness. The Sphynx and the Cobra are excellent yoga poses for cramps because they move energy into the kidneys, lower back and adrenal systems. But be warned. During this time of the month, you will need to modify your yoga practice. No inverted postures and don't hold poses for too long. Keep it gentle.

Breast development. Chest opening, backward and forward bending, and upside-down yoga poses will strengthen arms, shoulders and back, as well as teach these parts of your body to balance out newly gained weight up front.

Breathing. Knowing different breathing techniques will bring your mind into balance both creatively and analytically. It improves intellectual performance and helps you relax. A great go-to during that stressful math test or that first nerve-racking date you've been waiting for.

"Relaxation poses (Sivasana) are popular because [generally,] teenagers don't really get a chance to relax and just lie there," says Barlow. "The ability to bring oneself to a relaxed place is so important, especially for teenagers. This pos-

ture allows the 'prana,' or life force, in the body to move freely."

Preventing Injuries. Whether it's your big tennis match or cheerleading at the rival football game, your muscles may not be as gung-ho about giving it their all as you are. Throughout adolescence, when the body is still growing and bones, muscles, tendons and ligaments are changing, stress injuries are common. You can avoid injuries by having a more flexible body and knowing the proper stretches to do before the big game. Yoga balances out the stresses associated with sports and helps relieve tightness and strengthen weakness.

Healthy insides. Your insides are still growing and changing during your teenage years. Yoga helps to keep organs healthy despite everyday stresses. During this growth period, yoga is useful in easing the tension of tight muscles, tendons and ligaments, and it can also help strengthen bones, according to Luby.

You've Won!

You will feel the initial benefits of yoga right away...you'll soon notice a more centered, stronger, empowered you. The physical rewards take a little more time to see, but they are well worth the wait. In order to reap all the benefits of yoga, aim for 20 to 30 minutes, three times a week. Rent a video (see the sidebar on great videotape choices) and have a yoga night with your best girlfriends. Light candles, turn on a soothing CD of flutes or nature sounds and try not to giggle. Work your way through forward bends and warrior poses. Look for classes in your area or ask a fitness instructor for a recommendation.

And what if you try yoga but don't feel like you "get it"? Don't stress. As Barlow says, "Yoga: if you don't get it, it'll get you." ■

En-Chant-ing

"Aum." Each sound comes from the three minds, centering your body. Oh—from the Belly, Ah—from the Heart, M—from the Hara (Mind). When strung together, it creates the well-known chant during yoga breathing.