



BALANCING YOUR YEAR IN 2010

By Kristen Heim, Certified Yoga Practitioner
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Yoga is one of the best physical exercise programs for all ages. It allows everyone to move at their own pace gradually gaining more strength and flexibility when sticking to a regular exercise schedule. It goes without saying that there is no one “type” of yoga student. Regardless of physical fitness, there are some health concerns that may affect the decision to join a yoga practice. Some of these conditions may include: heart disease, cancer, fibromyalgia, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension and recent surgeries. Studies have shown, people who practice yoga recover from surgery faster, reduce symptoms of diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma.

Researchers at Indiana University released a study in March 2009 that showed older adults who practice hatha yoga may be less afraid of falling – that fear can limit physical and social activity, ultimately diminishing the quality of life.

Participants in the study, 14 men and women with an average age of 78 years, took beginner hatha yoga classes twice weekly for twelve weeks. They reported a six percent reduction in fear of falling and 34 percent increase in lower body flexibility. The participants reported "tremendous benefits," including the ability to increase their range of motion, increased flexibility and improved balance.

Kristen Heim teaches yoga in Alexandria. She has several suggestions to help you improve your health by taking a few minutes out of your daily activities.

She recommends you choose poses that:

- Calm the brain and heart using breathing techniques found during meditation.

Start in a seated position on the floor or in a chair in a nice quiet room. Sit tall, elongating each vertebra, guide the shoulder blades toward your ears, roll them back so the shoulder blades almost touch. Keeping the chest nice and open, close your eyes and feel yourself relax your breath for at least five minutes.

- Provide both extension and flexion, which decrease back pain. Kristen recommends moving from the cat to the cow pose, which can be done as multiple modifications: standing, seated in a chair or on all fours on the floor.

Sit in the middle of a sturdy chair, make sure your feet touch the ground, your

knees need to be in alignment with your ankles and your shoulders should stack over your waist. Guide your tailbone under you as you feel each vertebra arch behind you, engage your abdominals dropping the crown of your head, slide your hands toward your knees to feel a nice rounded back (cow). Guide your tailbone toward the chair feeling each vertebra move toward the front of the room, lifting your chest forward and up, opening the heart and moving the shoulders back and down (cat). Hold each pose for at least 15 seconds, repeat each pose five times.

- Improve balance by strengthening the surrounding ligaments and tissues, such as tree pose.

Stand on a hard surface with your feet hip distance apart, shift your weight on the left foot, keeping your left foot firmly on the ground. Lift the right foot and place the heel of the foot on the ankle making sure your knee is pointed out toward the side. Keep your chin level with the ground, gaze up at a fixed point in front of you, move your right foot up the left leg making sure not to place your foot on your left knee. If you want to guide your right foot above the knee, pick your right ankle up with your right hand and gently place it on the standing leg, press your right foot into the standing leg to keep your balance. When you feel comfortable in this pose, you may bring one hand to heart center and guide the other hand to meet it. Switch sides and remember practice makes perfect!

Kristen Heim is a certified yoga practitioner and a long-time resident of Fairfax County. She teaches beginner and advanced yoga classes to the general adult population in Alexandria. Consultations and the first class are free. Visit www.fierysunfitness.com or call (703) 863-3607 for more information.