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Chapter **1**

Yoga Over 50 Is Just Smart

Yoga is such a brilliant way to nurture both your physical, mental, and spiritual health. The only thing you may need to do is make certain modifications that will address any changing needs and keep you safe — and keep you practicing Yoga throughout your life. That's exactly what this book will help you do.

The fact is, everyone's body is different. Everyone is born with certain innate abilities, as well as certain limitations. Additionally, whether you're in your thirties or in your eighties, age may also carry with it certain limitations. All humans may be similar in structure, but each person has very specific needs.

Understanding the Benefits of Yoga

There are numerous benefits from doing Yoga. Some benefits have been scientifically measured, others have yet to be medically proven. Regardless, most everyone who tries Yoga or does Yoga regularly often talks about having a better sense of

overall well-being and having more energy. Best of all, there are many aspects of Yoga you can use outside of a Yoga class. Among them are better posture and balance, improved strength and flexibility, and breathing techniques that can calm down your system in stressful situations.

A lot of Yoga offered today can be fast-paced, which may not work for you. On the other end is a chair Yoga class or Restorative Yoga. Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of classes in-between.

So, this book is part of that in-between. It shows you that you don't have to do the hardest version of a posture to receive the greatest benefits. Whether you're just beginning Yoga or you want to continue practicing Yoga throughout your life, this book identifies some of the modifications you can make that will allow you to start or to continue reaping the benefits of Yoga, including:

- » Reduced stress
- » Better sleep
- » Improved circulation
- » Improved strength and flexibility
- » Greater will power and an overall sense of well-being

As your body continues to change with age, you need to pursue a type of Yoga that adapts to those changing needs. Yet so few Yoga classes — or YouTube videos or DVDs — embrace these sorts of modifications.



WARNING

If you look around your town at the Yoga classes available to you, the majority of them will have the word *flow* in the title. This word may be your first red flag because flow classes are typically fast-moving by design.

If you're new to Yoga, it may be better to stay with introductory or level one classes.

In today's world, people often have limited time for exercise and they want a Yoga class to have a cardio component. Unfortunately, the rapid tempo of some classes sometimes means you're rushed getting in and out of poses — and you don't have enough time to consider if the pose is good for you in the first place.

The early Yoga masters taught these same kinds of flowing classes, but it's critical for you to note that they were probably teaching young boys. And, indeed, these young boys most likely had very different bodies than the one you're working with now.

It's also worth noting that these very same Yoga masters started teaching differently when they began to work with middle-aged people who were not from India. Their students' needs were different and unique, and so are yours.

Yoga at 50-plus

As a Yoga therapist and teacher, I believe that Yoga should be good for you: good for your body, mind, and spirit. Indeed, I have spent a significant part of my life trying to bring the benefits of Yoga to anyone who is interested — people like you!

You're interested enough to read this book because you've tried Yoga and liked it. Or, you suspect Yoga may have something special to offer.

The truth is, Yoga can be a great practice for anyone, offering you a multitude of benefits — if you practice the type of Yoga that's right for your body. And, what's right for your body at age 20-something is probably very different from what is right at 50-something.

At age 50 and over, Yoga may help in these essential ways:

- » Keeps muscles, bones, and joints from losing density, length, and flexibility
- » Sustains mobility with greater ease of movement
- » Protects against falling down and incurring injuries
- » Guards against skin from becoming thinner, looser, and more easily damaged
- » May help recover from some injuries faster

Yoga reduces stress

The ability of Yoga to reduce stress is widely known, and it may, in fact, be your No. 1 reason for beginning a new routine or wanting to continue your existing practice. The benefits of stress reduction can include:

- » Lower blood pressure and heart rate
- » A decrease in muscle tension
- » Better sleep (including the ability to fall asleep)
- » Prevention or management of certain medical conditions that may be related to stress (including asthma, obesity, diabetes, migraines, certain gastrointestinal issues — even Alzheimer's disease)

The fact is that reducing stress can even slow down the aging process, which may be of particular interest to the 50-plus Yogi. I talk a lot in this book about reducing or eliminating stress.

Yoga helps you breathe easier

Breathing is something you've been doing automatically since the moment you were born. But what if you changed it from something that happens without thinking to a process you guide with your conscious mind?

The first reason I talk so much in this book about breathing is that shifting the process from something you don't think about to something you do gives your mind a target on which to focus. It helps focus what I'm sure is a mind that's constantly flooded with an abundance of thoughts. And when your mind is focused on a positive activity, stress and anxiety may start to dissipate.

And this point brings up the second reason I focus on breath — and why Yoga focuses so much on breath. Timing your inhalations and exhalations with specific movements can help relax your body. Basically, as you can see throughout this book, I ask you to inhale when you open up and exhale when you fold. If you follow this approach, your diaphragm moves more freely, and your stress level can be lowered because you're breathing more easily.

Later in this book I offer some deep breathing routines that will bring these feel-good promises to life for you (see Chapter 3 for details on these routines and how breath work helps to reduce stress).

Yoga helps your body

Many of my private clients come or have come from the world of professional sports, and I was initially surprised that most of them decided to retire somewhere around the age of 40. Why? Because their bodies were changing. Yours may be, too — but Yoga can help you counter many of the typical effects of aging.

When you are of an age when you need reading glasses, that's not negotiable. But perhaps the best news about Yoga is that it can help your body mature gracefully. Yoga can counter common events such as muscles starting to feel stiff and less flexible. Every muscle in your body is subject to these changes, and what specific muscles are affected is certainly determined by how and by how much you move on a daily basis.

With a regular Yoga practice, you will most likely avoid pulling your back while bending over to make a bed or straining your back picking up something off the floor.

Movement

There's a lot of power derived from simple movement. I can certainly see this power as a Yoga teacher, and even more so as a Yoga therapist. In Yoga therapy, as I apply basic Yoga principles and techniques to help people deal with chronic conditions, I more often than not prescribe simple breath work and movement to help manage a condition or chronic pain.

In today's world, many people suffer from being too stationary. Sitting behind a desk or in front of a computer or TV may create physical or mental problems that you can often counter by easy movement.

One of my most important tenets as a Yoga teacher and therapist — and as the author of this book — is that you don't have to do the most challenging poses to reap the physical benefits.

Many of the routines in this book involve stretching your muscles. This focus on stretching will hopefully help increase both your flexibility and range of motion. These outcomes are particularly important to people 50-plus, who may be less flexible than they were years ago. More than that, inflexibility and a compromised range of motion can make you more prone to falling. The key then is to do Yoga in a safe way.

When I think of flexibility, I always think about the spine. In fact, in Yoga, spine health and mobility are my No. 1 priority. A healthy spine will keep you free from a lot of routine chronic pain, and it will improve your posture by allowing you to stand up taller and straighter.

Balance

Throughout life, learning to balance is always a challenge, but the rewards are great. As a baby, you learn to walk; as a child, you learn to ride a bike; in your teens, you may want to try a skateboard or learn to ski. Maintaining a good sense of balance is a must.

Yet balance takes practice at any age. I include in this book some Yoga poses that require balance. Don't be discouraged if you're not particularly stable at first. Your body and your brain will learn. And just like walking or riding a bike took some practice, so, too, will balance poses. Stay safe (maybe stand near a wall), and you'll get better with repetition.

Chronic conditions

So many of the chronic conditions that plague us are caused or complicated by stress and a lifestyle that keeps people sitting in front of the TV or computer and not moving enough. Those conditions include:

- » Back issues (upper and lower)
- » Breathing difficulties
- » Stress
- » Arthritis
- » High blood pressure
- » Obesity
- » Osteoporosis
- » Insomnia
- » Headaches



REMEMBER

Yoga can be a great tool in your toolbox for either preventing or managing many of these conditions by building strength and flexibility, improving the way you breathe, and reducing the amount of stress in your life. If you're just starting out or perhaps taking your existing Yoga practice to a new level, you will want to practice Yoga in a way that improves your health.

Yoga for meditation

The health benefits of meditation for anyone at any age are well documented. While some studies suggest a meditation routine can actually delay the symptoms of Alzheimer's or dementia, simply reducing your stress may have a positive impact on things like your blood pressure or those conditions associated with increased stress and anxiety. That's why I've dedicated a whole chapter to meditation in this book (see Chapter 5).

Yoga improves your mental health

I talk about how Yoga reduces stress in the section earlier in this chapter, and I make references to stress reduction throughout the book. I also focus on the link between the mind and the body and how having a healthy emotional self may also help you maintain a healthy physical self.

In Yoga, whether you're doing movements, postures, or breath work, the goal is always to steady the mind, slow your breathing and heart rate, and provide a refuge of sorts where you can find some peace and tranquility. In fact, many Yoga practitioners report better mental attitudes and better sleep, according to a study, "The Use of Yoga for Physical and Mental Health Among Older Adults: A Review of the Literature," published by the International Association of Yoga Therapists.

Check with your healthcare provider before you start

Make sure you talk to your doctor before you start a Yoga practice. I would never want to circumvent anything another healthcare provider is telling you, so don't make the decision to try Yoga without your doctor's knowledge and consent. And if you're currently not seeing a doctor, but are dealing with acute pain, jumping into Yoga is not the answer.

Finding Your Place in the World of Yoga

The challenge in putting together this book, as well as teaching any public class, is that people come to Yoga with varying degrees of experience and unique bodies. My goal is to be helpful to everyone.

If you're new to Yoga, start slowly and gently — and, most of all, be patient. Some poses will get easier with practice, and some will not. In the end, everyone is assigned a certain body type with certain abilities and limitations. In starting a new practice, you'll discover both if you pay attention.



TIP

Modifications are the key to a lifelong practice. As our bodies change, all you need to do is modify where necessary, and you'll be a practicing Yogi for the rest of your life.

You may find it very helpful to ignore your ego and compulsion to compete (even with yourself!). Forget about what you used to be able to do! It is critical to remember that Yoga needs to make you healthier, and you need to make choices that are smart for your body as it is today.

Selecting the Right Place and the Right Teacher for You

When it comes to practicing Yoga, I know you have a lot of choices. There's definitely an abundance of classes available to you, whether it's visiting a local Yoga studio or viewing a DVD or video on your computer or smartphone. The most important thing is to choose a level of instruction that is appropriate to your current level of practice. If you happen to select a class — whether it's at a studio or on a video at home — that's too advanced or even too easy, you could easily get the wrong impression about what Yoga has to offer.

Let me give you my thoughts about the various options available to you.

Selecting classes wisely

Depending on where you live, you may find Yoga studios on every other block. If so, you need to be selective.

Keep in mind that many of the flow classes or power Yoga classes are designed for people in their 20s who are looking for a more athletic experience — one that has an intense cardio component. The reality is that in today's world, people have only a limited amount of time for fitness, so — even in Yoga classes — they are looking for a session that combines stretching and strength with routines that will get their heart rate up at the same time. Unfortunately, these classes may not work for you.

WHAT IS YOGA THERAPY?

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) defines *Yoga therapy* as “the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the teachings and practices of Yoga.” While a Yoga therapy session is usually conducted one-on-one (so the therapist can focus on the specific needs of the client), Yoga therapy group classes are becoming more common. In these types of classes, all the students share the same condition (maybe it's a class for people with arthritis) or the class targets a specific area of the body with the objective of maintaining health (for example, a healthy lower-back class). In all cases, whether in a one-on-one session or a group class, Yoga therapy is not intended to be a substitute for medical treatment, nor is it for people in acute pain.

Although you may see Yoga therapy-type classes that can address the specific needs of a particular population (for example, people looking for an emphasis on lower-back health), if you're dealing with a personal health issue, you should seek individualized Yoga therapy.

Again, it's not about being less motivated; it's about being smart. You don't want to be in a class where the poses or the tempo require you to practice in a way that compromises your safety. You're there to get healthy, not injured. And, as I always say, "Yoga is not in a hurry" (or at least it shouldn't be).

Choose your studios — and your classes — carefully.



TIP

Although you may see Yoga therapy-type classes that can address the specific needs of a particular population (for example, people looking for an emphasis on lower-back health), if you're dealing with a personal health issue, you should seek individualized Yoga therapy.

Of course, even general Yoga classes are ideal when they're one-on-one because the Yoga teacher can adapt the instruction to the very specific needs of the student. Private Yoga lessons, however, are a bit costly for most people.

Yoga has become so pervasive today that your choices on where to practice and whom to select as a teacher can seem infinite and definitely confusing. You can turn to a number of places where you'll find a comfortable setting and an encouraging and well-qualified teacher. The critical first step is to make a thoughtful choice.

Although no one place or teacher is right for everyone, you need both to be right for you. If you're a novice and you find yourself in a class that's designed for more experienced Yogis, or if you discover your teacher is too aloof or perhaps lacking in knowledge, please move onto another option so you don't miss out on the many benefits Yoga can offer you.

YOGA TRENDS

It has been exciting to see ancient Yoga practices evolve into so many branches to serve modern needs. *For example, some styles of Yoga fit the person to the Yoga Pose.* My style fits the Yoga positions to the person.

In any case, new forms of Yoga are always popping up, as well as Yoga hybrids: paddle-board yoga, aerial yoga, acro yoga (acrobatics and yoga), Pi-Yo Yoga (Pilates and Yoga)—even Laughing Yoga (see Chapter 7).

My concern is that many of these classes are very athletic or very rapid in tempo and not necessarily safe for everyone. The demand for these types of classes comes from the fact the most people have only a limited amount of time to work out. So, in addition to building strength and flexibility, they also want a good cardio workout — they want to burn calories. As a result, many of these newer Yoga classes do just that, but they may not be a good or a safe choice for you.

Home

In addition to the wide range of in-person classes that may be available to you in your neighborhood, you've undoubtedly come across hundreds — maybe even thousands — of Yoga DVDs to purchase or free Yoga videos on YouTube or on some other streaming services.

While many talented teachers and well-designed videos are at your disposal, your particular challenge is to find the ones that are just right for you — videos that will actually improve your health and fitness and not lead to injury. There are some great DVDs and videos out there; you need to choose carefully — and choose wisely.

Many of the videos that I've come across are designed for what I call the young and restless. If you combine an inappropriately aggressive practice with the fact that you're in front of your computer or TV instead of in the actual company of an experienced teacher who is trying to keep you safe, you may be courting injury.

Even in my own DVD series, I know that some people may have conditions that make certain postures or movements difficult or unwise. Nonetheless, I make every effort to provide the viewer with as much information as I can relating to the benefits or risks of a certain poses. In fact, the first priority of all my videos is practicing in a way that increases the benefits and minimizes the risks.



TIP

I don't want to recommend any specific video or teacher (besides this book, of course), but I do want to set the bar high. If you do try a DVD or video, you may want to look for something that is specifically designed for your age group. You may be able to determine this directly from the title. Also, look at the qualifications of the teacher. Ideally, that person will have some degree of expertise in adapting Yoga to the 50-plus body.

Gym

Some very talented teachers, as well as some great classes, are at gyms. Again, just make sure the class offers the right approach for you.

People who come to the gym tend to have only a limited amount of time to dedicate to fitness. As a result, gyms may design their classes to provide a rigorous overall workout. People who come to these classes are often looking for a cardio component, so the Yoga classes tend to be *flow classes*, which keep you moving rapidly, or *power Yoga classes*, which emphasize strength and endurance.

If you're trying a class at the gym, talk to the teacher beforehand to make sure it's the right class for you.

Houses of worship, community centers, and libraries

You can find some great classes and teachers in houses of worship, community centers, and libraries. Make sure the teacher is experienced and skilled, providing modifications for bodies of different abilities. And make sure the makeshift studio offers the right space and right props, or it's no bargain at all.

You may find that the Yoga teacher is just renting space at any of these venues.



REMEMBER

The bottom line is be selective. Make sure the type of class is appropriate for your skill level and that the teacher is good at keeping a roomful of people safe and informed.

Practicing without Injury

As the number of people attending Yoga classes continues to climb, so, too, are the number of people going to emergency rooms because they got hurt in a Yoga class. I don't want you to be one of them — and that's one of the reasons I wrote this book.

You're probably completely on board with the goals of strengthening your body, increasing your flexibility and balance, reducing stress, and breathing more mindfully. But you'll want to add one more: avoiding injury. A key problem, from my observation, is that too many people don't listen to their bodies and trust their own instincts on what postures are beneficial and which ones are risky, or heed their pain signals. Instead, they make the mistake of listening to their egos.

Sometimes, people want to keep up with their hyper-mobile, 20-something teacher, or they want to show the people practicing next to them that they are just as flexible and just as advanced, or they want to do the moves they did when they last did Yoga 20 years ago. And that is just plain foolish.



WARNING

I strongly advise you to ignore how you look in a Yoga pose, and certainly please do not compare yourself to how anyone else looks doing Yoga.

They say with age comes wisdom, and my hope is that we all bring some of that hard-won wisdom to the Yoga mat. Listen to your body; listen to your intuition; and be smarter. If you're able to do this, you will discover how Yoga can make you better, even healthier, than you are today. And there's a good chance you'll avoid injury.

Playing It Safe

As previously mentioned, preparing your muscles and joints before moving in and out of various poses helps to reduce the possibility of injury, especially from over-stretching.

Moving in and out of a pose before holding it is referred to as the dynamic/static approach which can also yield the benefits of PNF (explained in detail below).

So, then, there are a few reasons to move first before holding a pose: Mainly it lubricates your joints and helps you stretch further.

You should not only come to expect this form of movement, but I'll bet you will learn to enjoy it!

Warming up

How often do you see athletes warming up before a game or runners stretching out before breaking into a sprint? It probably makes perfect sense to you. Before moving or stressing the body in a new way, warming up seems logical.

In Yoga classes, you frequently start with a short warm-up sequence. A good teacher will always structure the class so that one posture or movement prepares the body for what's coming next.

Our bodies benefit from preparing joints and muscles before each new posture. That is why I frequently move my students in and out of poses before I ask them to hold steady. You should consider this approach as well.

One of the reasons Yoga is such an effective routine for nurturing your body is that it tries to bring movement — often stretching, sometimes strengthening — to all areas of the body. That means, at some point in your practice, whether you're in a class or by yourself at home, most all of your muscles and moveable joints will be worked.

As far as your joints go, your goal is to warm them up in such a way that focuses on specific movements (or ranges of motion). Just to be clear, your moveable joints include:

» Ankles

» Knees

- » Hips
- » Spine
- » Neck
- » Shoulders
- » Elbows
- » Wrists

I include a great routine for joint health in Chapter 16. You may want to check it out.

Of course, if you have any joint replacements, you need to consider a few additional items. For that, please refer to Chapter 14.

Preparing the joints

If joints like your knees and ankles are designed to move, the joints themselves must be properly lubricated. Just like in your car, proper lubrication reduces the amount of friction between moving parts.

Moving in and out of a pose before holding it helps to distribute the lubrication (called *synovial fluid*) to all parts of the joint.

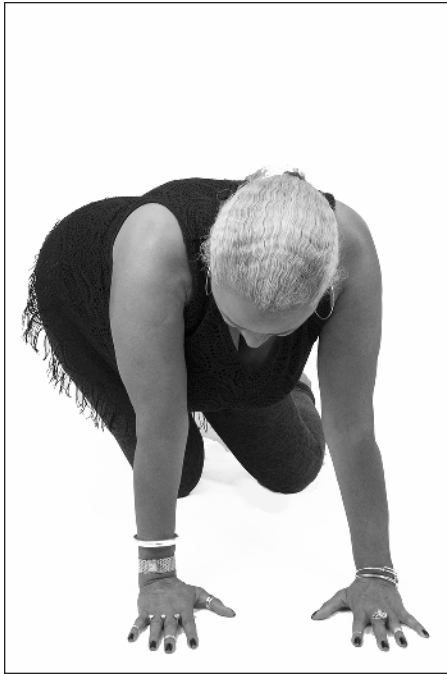
Take, for example, a simple hip rotation (see Figure 1-1). This movement is intended to focus on the hip joint — that big ball and socket where the top of your leg (your femur) fits into your hip socket. By rotating your knee in big circles, the joint is working in its full range of motion, distributing lubrication, and better preparing you for the movements to come.

No wonder football players do this exact same warm-up before taking the field for a game.

Performing magic with PNF

Another potential benefit of moving in and out of a posture is related to the concept of Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation, or PNF, that I talked about before. This topic is somewhat complex, and fitness experts debate how PNF actually prepares the muscles and joints. Nevertheless, one of the most basic aspects of PNF is this: If you tense a muscle before you try to stretch it, it will relax more.

FIGURE 1-1:
Hip circles
prepare the
hip joints.



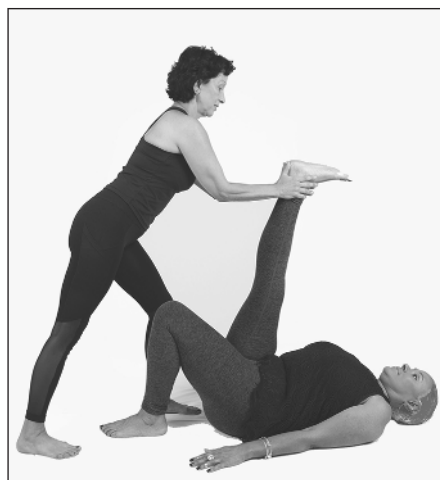
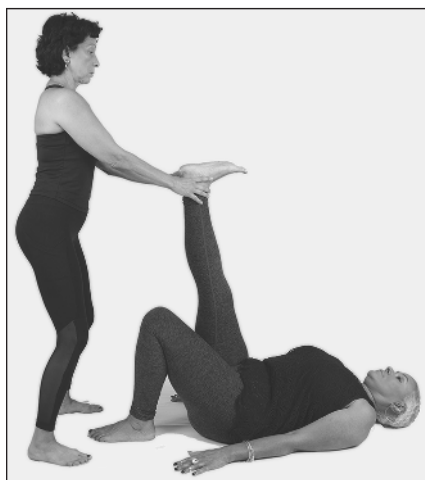
Typically, you can tense a muscle in two ways:

- » **Isometric:** Pushing against a fixed force
- » **Isotonic:** Tightening a muscle using gentle resistance

Isometric stretching in Yoga usually involves a partner. For example, you can lie on the floor, with a straight leg lifted up and propped against your partner (see Figure 1-2). By first pressing the heel of the lifted leg against your partner, the muscles in your leg will tighten. After holding that press for approximately eight seconds, you can release the pressure and move the leg in the opposite direction. As a result of first tensing the muscles, they will now relax further than they would have had you not tightened them first.

Of course, most of the time when you practice, no one is around to help you. This is where the dynamic/static approach comes in — moving in and out of a posture before holding it.

FIGURE 1-2:
PNF with
isometric
resistance.



If you perform the same movement (see Figure 1-3) by lifting and lowering your leg yourself before holding the stretch, you're actually tensing your muscles; each time you lower your leg, if you don't tense your muscles, your leg would come crashing to the ground with the force of gravity.



TIP

My rationale, then, is simple: If the PNF concept that tensing a muscle before you stretch it will ultimately allow it to stretch further, then moving in and out of a posture, before holding, may offer some of the same benefit.

FIGURE 1-3:
PNF using
isotonic
resistance.



Modifications

Knowing your own body and what it can do on any given day is essential. Teachers should be offering and demonstrating a variety of modifications of poses. In addition, the chapters in this book provide you with some important tips and guidance for modifying Yoga to fit your particular needs.

