

Embrace Your Curves

Yoga helps you love the body you have—now.

BY LAUREL KALLENBACH

Leaning against the wall, I bend forward and raise one leg 90 degrees into Half Moon, a balance pose. When I'm steady, I unfurl my arms: one to a block on the floor, the other skyward. Supported by my standing leg, I feel like I could fly—all 175 curvy pounds of me. I feel strong and light, even though my thighs, rear, stomach, and breasts are larger than most of my classmates'.

I now weigh 45 pounds less than I did 10 years ago (thanks to yoga), but I still feel self-conscious in a class of skinny people, even if I am as flexible as they are. Nonetheless, my yoga practice has deepened, and I'm better at keeping my negative "fat" voice off the mat as I focus on how my body feels as it moves—not how it looks.

"Many heavy people feel disenfranchised from the benefits of yoga because of their size," says Abby Lentz, a yoga teacher from Austin, Texas, who created the DVD "HeavyWeight Yoga" (heartfelyoga.com). In her classes for overweight and obese people, Lentz emphasizes the positive, mind-body-spirit effects of this ancient practice. "My goal is to get people to the yoga mat now, not after they've lost 100 pounds," says Lentz. After all, yoga's benefits—better health, peace of mind, and self-acceptance—can be particularly powerful for women who struggle with weight. Studies report that women who do yoga have better self-esteem and fewer eating disorders than those who stay in shape by running or attending gym classes. And regular practice of the *asanas* (poses) may in fact lower blood pressure, improve circulation and balance, and build strength.

Yoga also develops self-discipline, stress management, and greater body awareness. "When we're overweight, we tend to live in the head instead of the body. Yoga heals that dissociation and helps us feel whole again," says full-figured instructor Meera Patricia Kerr who teaches in southwest Michigan. Yoga fosters mindfulness and compassion that

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Yoga Studio Tips

Boost your yoga practice—and self-confidence—by taking a class. With a few pointers, you'll feel prepared and relaxed.

- * Arrive early to talk to the teacher. Inform him or her about your health concerns or injuries. Find out what props you'll need.
- * Ask the teacher to signal you if there's a pose you shouldn't do.
- * Try several classes, yoga styles, and teachers until you find a good fit.
- * Commit to yoga for at least a month to give yourself the chance to feel its benefits.
- * Bring a friend for support.

1.



2.



Yoga for Round Bodies

Plus-size instructor Megan Garcia demonstrates modified poses in her book *MegaYoga* (DK, 2006). These four, common in yoga classes, account for ample body parts.

1. Child's Pose (*Balasana*)

EFFECT: Wide knees in this relaxing, back-stretching pose allow for deep breathing.

HOW TO: Drop your hips to your heels, spreading your knees wide enough to make room for your chest and belly. Reach your arms forward, and rest your forehead down. If your head doesn't reach the floor, stack your fists, and place your forehead on them. If your knees hurt, place a pillow on top of your calves, and sit back on it.



2. Dolphin Pose

EFFECT: An alternative to Headstand and Downward Dog, Dolphin increases blood flow to the brain, opens shoulders and upper back, and stretches hamstrings.

HOW TO: Begin on your hands and knees. Lower your elbows to the mat directly under your shoulders. Rest your forearms on the floor, and clasp your hands. Exhale as you lift your hips up toward the ceiling, straightening your legs and lowering your heels as close to the floor as possible. Take five deep breaths, and release your head and neck completely.

BREAST-BINDING TIP: A yoga strap can keep your breasts from falling into your face when you're upside down. Buckle the strap into a loop; slip it over your head and shoulders and under your armpits. Tighten the loop so it compresses the breasts and won't slip during the inversion. If you don't want to wrestle with this in class, check out "The Right Fit" on page 67 for our favorite hold-it-all-in sports bra.

3. Warrior II (*Virabhadrasana II*)

EFFECT: Strength and balance without knee strain; promotes confidence

HOW TO: Position a chair to your right with the seat facing away from you. Stand with your feet hip-width apart, right hand on the chair. Exhaling, lunge your left leg back to a wide, but comfortable distance. Face forward. Keep your right foot parallel to the mat's edges and pigeon-toe your left foot in slightly, resting your right hand on the chair for balance. Bend your right knee deeply (your knee should not come forward of your ankle) and look straight ahead or over your right arm. Hold the pose for five breaths. Repeat on the other side.



4. Half Moon Pose (*Ardha Chandrasana*)

EFFECT: Opens hips, improves balance, builds leg and core strength

HOW TO: Start with your back against a wall. Put a yoga block in front of your right foot, and step your feet apart, turning your right foot out 90 degrees (parallel to the wall). Bend your right knee; pick up a block with your right hand and move it about a foot in front of your right leg, against the wall. With most of your weight on your right leg, simultaneously straighten that leg and raise your left leg up until it's parallel to the floor (if possible). Your left leg, hips, shoulders, and head should rest against the wall. Reach your left arm up toward the ceiling, and turn your belly and chest toward the ceiling, too. Look up at your left hand or straight ahead. Breathe here for five breaths and repeat on other side.

TIP: For extra support, use a chair instead of a block, resting your hand on the seat.

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can help you replace negativity with self-acceptance. When you feel physically tight, yoga allows you to breathe into the muscles to relax them. It's the same when you encounter a difficult emotion such as fear or guilt. You learn to inhale and exhale through that too, working toward a place of greater confidence.

Practicing yoga helps you tone and build muscle, and you might even drop a few pounds. But don't count on it to get your heart pumping when you first start. Most beginning-level yoga doesn't push into the cardio (fat-burning) zone, but as you gain strength and flexibility, you can take more physically demanding classes. "Anyone who doubts that yoga contributes to strength should try 10 to

20 continuous Sun Salutations or take a vinyasa or Ashtanga class in which poses flow one into another without stopping,” says David Riley, MD, founder of the Integrative Medicine Institute at the University of New Mexico.

That said, do yoga for yoga’s sake, not because you want to shed 20 or 40 pounds. You might lose weight—a nice side effect—but using yoga to burn calories is missing the power of its mind-body connection. “Yoga offers a non-judgmental opportunity to start moving, breathing, sweating, and maybe feeling bottled-up emotions for the first time,” says Megan Garcia, a plus-size model, author of *MegaYoga* (DK, 2006), and cre-

ator of a practice for curvy women. “My students often realize they’re stronger and more capable than they thought.”

“Yoga also helps overweight women reconnect with the beauty of the physical body,” says Kerr. Recent studies have proven that you can be large and physically fit. Likewise, you can be round and beautiful. So don’t shun yoga because you have love handles or can’t squeeze into a teensy camisole. Instead, ditch nay-saying voices that belittle your appearance, and disregard internal insinuations that your body can’t bend or that others are staring. “Through yoga, I’ve come to a place where I no longer think self-deprecating thoughts that pull me

The Right Fit

For rounder women, finding yoga clothes that look *and* feel good can be frustrating. Yoga classes are fraught with potential wardrobe malfunctions—everything from tops that expose love handles or cleavage to low-waisted pants that reveal a little too much information. We’ve screened the spandex to find the clothing lines and styles that best fit the curvaceous (where a large is *actually* a large and not a medium).

Big chest: A plunging V-neck and empire waist flatters figures with large bustlines. Both Prana and Patagonia make shirts in these styles: Stella Top (sizes through XL, \$48; prana.com); Women’s Banda Top (sizes through L, \$50; patagonia.com); and Women’s Long Sleeved Serenity Top (sizes through L, \$65; patagonia.com). Moving Comfort makes fabulous bras with enough support to prevent sag and uncomfortable bouncing. For the most support, try the Maia Bra (sizes through 44DD, \$46; movingcomfort.com).

Wide hips: Pants that flare, rather than taper, complement the curves of women with wider hips. Prana and Lucy offer great options: Asana Yoga Pant (sizes through XL, \$65; prana.com); Power Pant (sizes through XL with lengths in regular, short, and tall; \$74 to \$78; lucy.com); and Chi Capri (sizes through XL, \$58; lucy.com).

Large belly: For women with a belly, pants that hold everything in—without being too tight—offer reassuring wardrobe security. Prana and Lucy make pants with thick material and waistbands intended to do just that: Elisa Pant (sizes through XL, \$65; prana.com) and Studio Pant (sizes through XL with lengths in regular, short, and tall; \$74 to \$78; lucy.com).

Height challenges: For women who are shorter or taller than average, finding yoga bottoms that don’t require altering are few and far between. But Lucy and Lululemon have got you covered. Many of Lucy’s pants come in regular, short, and tall lengths, and Lululemon offers regular and tall, plus complimentary hem adjustments.

Plus sizes: Few yoga clothing companies offer plus sizes, but thankfully, Moving Comfort has a whole line of clothes designed for larger women called MCW with sizes 1X to 3X (movingcomfort.com).

Eco-favorites: Many of the companies we’ve mentioned also offer eco-clothing options. Patagonia has an organic cotton line and so does Prana, along with a few items made from recycled polyester; Lucy provides a couple of pant choices made from bamboo fibers. —ELIZABETH GREGG