

Rediscovering yoga as effective medicine for modern diseases

While modern clinical drugs target isolated biochemical pathways, structured mind-body practices address the interconnected quagmire of metabolic disease, broken sleep, and psychological stress that define contemporary middle-age health challenges.



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The month of Saawan belongs to Shiva. Across India, millions fasted, queued at temples, and faithfully observed every ritual. But how many of us practiced yoga during Saawan? Very few. Despite Shiva being the ultimate and first yogi-AdiYogi!

That should give us pause. If Shiva represents stillness, balance, and mastery over the mind, yoga — not fasting alone — deserves a place among our priorities.

It is time to see yoga beyond religion, ritual, and wellness fashion — and to stop asking whether it is “good for you.” That is lifestyle-magazine language. The real question is more useful: does yoga have a place in how we manage the chronic diseases that now define Indian middle

age — diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, stress, poor sleep, and metabolic syndrome?

The evidence increasingly says yes.

I was recently asked to write an editorial for the *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine* on a dilemma facing today's world: miracle drugs to reduce weight, versus the old-fashioned yoga, diet, sleep, and lifestyle changes that also reduce weight. I had to remind readers, who are invariably physicians of different color and creed, that despite 200 Nobel Prizes and many attempts to create miraculous drugs, the standard treatment for weight loss remains the old-fashioned way. For people living with Type 2 diabetes, structured yoga programs have been associated with better blood glucose control and lower HbA1c. The reductions are moderate — but moderate is not trivial when it is sustained. Studies also report gains in insulin sensitivity, less visceral fat, steadier autonomic nervous system function, and lower inflammatory markers, which are linked to heart attack and



Representative Image

stroke risk.

High blood pressure is the second, and perhaps clearest, example. Yoga — especially controlled breathing, or pranayama — has been associated with lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure. Slow, regulated breathing as in Ujjayi breath may calm the nervous system, dampen the stress response, and support the body's own machinery for holding pressure in check. Here comes the part an

exhausted, sleep-starved society needs most. Yoga is not merely stretching. Its combination of movement, breath, attention (pratyahara), mindfulness (Dharana), and meditation (Dhyana) appears to work across several connected systems at once — stress regulation, sleep, autonomic balance, and inflammation — not just weight and sugar.

A drug is designed to act on a single or a few physiological pathways; therefore, it is

only one of the many tools for combating diabetes, obesity, or both. Yoga is a process that may influence the whole body and thus help address disease — and that is precisely its value. It is a mind-body and behavioral practice that engages physical activity, breathing, relaxation, psychological regulation, and daily habit simultaneously. Metabolic disease is not a single-pathway problem either: it is a quagmire of inactivity,

stress, broken sleep, poor eating, and low-grade inflammation feeding one another. A therapy that touches several of those threads at once is doing something a tablet, by design, cannot.

The debate must never become “yoga versus medicine.” A person with diabetes or hypertension should not stop prescribed medication because they have started yoga. Equally, a doctor should not dismiss yoga simply because it did not arrive in a blister pack.

Both pathways matter. Modern medicine tries to control disease with extraordinary precision — lowering pressure, regulating glucose, and producing real weight loss. However, all medicines have adverse effects, and their effects diminish over time, necessitating ever-higher doses. Yoga addresses the behavioral, psychological, and physiological substrates that contribute to aberrant physiology.

The science is unfinished new research exposes the scientific validity of many old-fashioned and ancient yoga practices. Yoga programs vary enormously —

from gentle restorative practice to demanding physical routines — which makes trials hard to compare. We still lack a clear answer on dose, how often, how long, which style, and at what intensity. Adherence and the durability of benefit remain understudied. We've also misunderstood yoga itself — as religion, as stretching, as a fitness product, as a cure for everything. All four readings miss the point. Yoga should neither be worshipped as a miracle nor dismissed as superstition. Similarly, Yoga should not be relegated to being spread by an illiterate few whose claim to fame is the fact that they can bend their head, legs, and neck to astounding angles. It is important to remember that Yoga is not acrobatic. You can be as good as a Yogi without packing all your leg bones and still enjoy all the power as well as health benefits of Yoga.

What we need is better science, better teaching and better integration: credible research in medical schools, proper training for instructors who work with patients, and doctors confident enough to discuss evidence-

based yoga without feeling disloyal to it.

What to do? The ordinary people need something simpler than all this. Consistency.

Our ancestors never used the words metabolic syndrome or chronic inflammation, but they grasped what modern life has made us forget: body, breath, mind, digestion, sleep, and emotional balance are one system. Research is only now catching up — including work on yoga, inflammation, and the gut microbiome. Do not make yoga an annual event or an International Yoga Day photograph. Make it a 15-to-30-minute daily habit. Give it six months — not as a replacement for your doctor or your medicines, but as a serious therapy alongside them.

Then look at your health charts. The most meaningful tribute to yoga is not to celebrate it once a year, but to practice it every day and let your own numbers tell the story.

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