

Importance of Yoga amidst COVID-19 pandemic

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As people look for home exercise lessons and ways to boost immunity and mental health, yoga has gained a fresh wave of popularity



Much like everything else on the planet today, yoga too has gone virtual! In many countries including India, this will be the second year when the International Yoga Day celebrations will be held virtually. The usefulness of yoga for mental peace and managing stress has been acknowledged by global experts. It is one of the reasons why last month the US state of Alabama lifted a 30-year-old ban on teaching yoga in schools with riders. The Indian Missions overseas have made the most of the opportunity and organised camps to promote the practice and India's soft power.

Interestingly, the Dutch Ministry of Defence is said to have introduced yoga for its armed forces some 15 years ago to help reduce stress and improve the physical and mental fitness of soldiers. With this year's International Yoga Day being commemorated in the midst of a pandemic, the relevance of this centuries-old Indian healing practice has increased manifold. People across the world are looking for new ways to keep them physically and mentally fit as the pandemic continues to cause job losses and pay cuts. The uncertainty lurking over the world has given rise to a parallel epidemic of stress, anxiety and depression. Yoga, a wholesome practice of aligning the body and the mind, is also being looked upon by people as a mental health saviour in these circumstances.

Yoga in a time of surging demand for home workouts

The COVID-19 crisis that has dramatically changed the ways we work and live has also changed the way we exercise and stay fit. As gyms remain closed, open spaces and parks remain restricted, people are resorting to home workouts. Runners and cyclists are looking for indoor exercise options to burn calories and stay agile. A natural corollary has been a surge in demand for home workout equipment and accessories such as treadmills, exercise bikes, resistance bands, skipping ropes, dumbbells along with fitness apps and online fitness programmes.

As a form of exercise that can be easily practised even in a small enclosed space, yoga has found new converts during the pandemic. While there was no dearth of online yoga sessions and apps even before COVID-19 broke out, most people usually preferred to perform yoga in groups and under the physical supervision of a trained expert. However, virtual yoga has now become viable for many people as they stay at home. Yoga apps and online yoga lessons are witnessing surging popularity. Recent market research estimated that the global Yoga mat market is estimated to reach \$17.32 billion by 2025, growing at a CAGR of 5.8 per cent from 2019 to 2025.

People who prefer to work out under the physical supervision of a 'guru', are now demanding personalised and customised yoga sessions suited for their individual needs. Many yoga and fitness apps have introduced solo yoga lessons to cater to such demands.

Yoga for immunity and lung health

Even though countries have vaccinated a section of their population, a strong immune system remains the only recourse for people against coronavirus. With its benefits for immunity and lung health, yoga has become an exercise of the first choice for many people. A study published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* in 2018 suggested that yoga can help boost the immune system and decrease inflammation in the body. Along with relaxation, exercise and meditation, *pranayama* or breathing control is a major pillar of yogic practice. The regular practice of pranayama is known to increase chest wall expansion and lung functions.

With shifting consumer preferences, yoga experts and lesson providers are also reporting a rise in numbers of people seeking greater expertise in meditation and pranayama as ways to reduce stress and improve lung function to beat the coronavirus threat.

Yoga with family

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our lives in many ways. However, if we could draw one positive leaf out of this experience, it is the valuable time people have got to spend with their families. With people saving their travel hours and working from home, the additional time at home is a useful opportunity to make memories with your family -- yoga is more than physical activity.

In the words of one of its most famous practitioners, the late BKS Iyengar, "Yoga cultivates the ways of maintaining a balanced attitude in day-to-day life and endows skill in the performance of one's actions."

Last year, the Ministry of AYUSH initiated a campaign 'Yoga at Home, Yoga with Family' to encourage people to adopt the practice and to stay healthy during the pandemic. This year, their video contest 'Be With Yoga, Be At Home' is likely to engage more people. By performing yoga together with your family, not only you get an opportunity to bond with your family but it also allows you to give your children a healthy practice that would stay on with them for their entire lives.

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