

Relationship Between Yoga and Nutrition

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How to cite this article:

Dhananjay Mankar, Priyanka Devi/Relationship Between Yoga and Nutrition/Int J Food Nutr Diet. 2023;11(1):31–34.

Abstract

Good health can be maintained through two key players which are diet and exercise. Yoga is one of the best ways to stay fit and healthy. It can improve health, flexibility, strength, posture, and so much more. According to studies, nutrition and Yoga have many overlapping advantages, including improved digestion, stress management, mindfulness, increased energy, and even detoxification. Yoga is all about taking deep breaths and building physical strength. Thus, a person should pay attention to his or her eating habits as well, so that the body is not involved in intensive digestive activity.

Yoga is a holistic philosophy that attempts to cleanse, strengthen, and develop all levels of our human existence. Good nutrition not only benefits our yoga practice, but it also benefits our whole mental and physical wellness. Because many yoga postures involve bending the abdomen, those who practice yoga tend to adopt healthful eating habits. A study conducted in the United States found that young American adults who practiced Yoga daily were more attentive to choosing healthy foods, which lowered their food cravings. With people's sedentary lifestyles, especially in urban areas, and an increasing incidence of NCDs, yoga, together with good nutrition, can be highly beneficial for those living in a developing country like India.

Keywords: Yoga; Nutrition; Diet; Food; Health; Exercise; Asana; Dietary pattern; Yoga practitioner.

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Received on: 24.02.2023

Accepted on: 03.03.2023

INTRODUCTION

Diet and exercise are the two important key players in maintaining good health. Yoga is an art and science of living a healthy and disciplined life. The word “yoga” is derived from the Sanskrit word “yuj” which means “to unite” and was first mentioned in the Rig Veda and the development of yoga can be traced back to over 5,000 years ago. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the yoga masters from India started travelling to the west to promote yoga. In the early 1900s, Hath Yoga was very strongly promoted by T. Krishnacharya,

Swami Sivananda and many other Indian yogis.¹ Yoga is one of the best ways to stay fit and healthy and increase our physical strength, flexibility and posture. Many yoga postures are related to bending of the abdomen, therefore people practicing Yoga tend to adopt healthy eating practices.

Nutrition is the combination of all the processes by which a living organism obtains and utilizes the nutrients essential for survival, growth and the repairing worn-out tissues. The food we consume fuels our body to function by various metabolic processes. The major components of a balanced nutrition diet consist of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals and water.

Today with the sedentary lifestyle of the people mostly in the urban areas, with increase in the number of NCDs, Yoga, along with proper nutrition can be beneficial for the people living in a developing country like India.

The objective of the study were

1. To understand the relationship between yoga and nutrition.
2. To understand the effect of yoga practice on people's nutrition choices.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study is conducted based on secondary data to understand the relationship between yoga and nutrition and the effect of yoga practice on the nutrition choices of people. Secondary data was collected from research papers, chapters of books, newspapers articles, blogs and international journals. The data collected from the above sources have played a pivotal role in developing the conclusion of the study in an efficient manner.

Global Prevalence of Yoga

Yoga has now become one of the most popular forms of exercise in the world. According to the International Yoga Federation more than 300 million people across the globe are practicing yoga all over the world and the number is increasing everyday.²

Currently there are several types of yoga. The one mostly practiced is the one described by Patanjali. This was introduced in America by Swami Vivekananda.³

Yogic Approach to nutrition

The main mantra of Yoga diet is "Eat for nutrition and not to satisfy emotions or for pleasure." Yoga and Ayurveda had long back laid the foundation of dietetics in India. the main interest of a yogi is not developing physical abilities and strength but to be able to control his body and atma.³ And to achieve he has modifications in his life habits which includes dietary moderations too.

Yoga has always laid strong emphasis on holistic diet and there are valuable guidelines for diet in the traditional yoga books like *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita*.⁴

According to these books, food is divided into three types:

- **Sattvic diet:** This pure and balanced diet provides the utmost energy and gives peace and mental clarity. It includes fruits, vegetables, sprouted grains, milk, curd, tubers, etc. it is similar to the modern day scientific balanced diet but more wisely planned.
- **Rajasic diet:** This diet consists of hot, spicy, salty food which is suppose to increase jealousy, anger, selfishness but also increases confidence and intelligence.
- **Tamasic diet:** Thus diet consists of food which makes one sleepy, lazy and pessimistic. This includes foods like meats of big animals, mushrooms, deep fried food, onions, butter, liquor and other stimulants.³

According to these books "mitahara" meaning controlled adequate diet containing lubricants and is palatable should be consumed by the yogis and only in quantity that fills half of the stomach and rest of the space must be left the movement of air. A yogi should eat fresh butter, ghee, sugar, sugarcane, jiggery, coconut, dates, etc and "*Sattvika Ahar*" i.e. food which are easily digestible.⁵

The main aim of yoga is self realization of oneself through 'niras' or 'nirodh' which means complete termination of all the distraction in the mind and consciousness. Our five senses get triggered by different stimulators surrounding us which then disturbs the systems of our body and according to Yoga these disturbances can be controlled by proper diet, physical exercises and keeping a positive outlook on life.⁵

Effect of Yoga on Digestion

Many yoga postures are known to stimulate the

digestive organs which increase their efficiency. There are Yoga asanas which are associated with the twist and release of breathe, which reduces the blood flow to the organs and enables fresh oxygenated blood to deliver it to the food.

Pranayama involves holding and releasing of breath which directly affects the nervous system and increases its activity. Salty food, alcohol, smoking and having very hot or very cold food are considered as external stimulating factors for the nervous system. Meat, eggs, and fish rich in sodium are also prohibited as they can make the yogi very sensitive during certain postures. As most of the yoga postures are strenuous, thus vegetables fibers and proteins are expected to repair the damaged tissues.

Some recent researches have shown that yoga practices reduce basal metabolism while in a meditative state and decrease urea, blood sugar, and blood cholesterol levels.⁵

Yoga and people's dietary choices

However the dietary pattern of an individual depends on many aspects and is a complex behavioral process. An individual's food choices is influenced by the group or society he comes from, food familiarity, availability, cost, taste preferences, culture, convenience and many other factors. Many cross sectional studies have shown that the yoga practitioner have a better dietary pattern than their counterparts who live a sedentary lifestyle. A study conducted in Thai women showed that those who practiced yoga had lower fat intake than those who practiced Tai Chi.⁶

A U.S. based study has shown that the young American adults engaged in daily yoga practice also tended to be mindful of their eating habits and reduced their food cravings. Another study showed that who practice yoga at home had an increase in the uptake of fruits and vegetables.³

Still there is no direct clear evidence available to show the effect of yoga on weight related health.

Effect of Yoga on the lives of the people

According to a comparison survey published in American Study in 2016, 80% of the yoga practitioners have a good balance in life as compared to the non practitioners which was only 65%. The Harvard Health Publishing claimed that people who practice yoga regularly are 20% more likely to have a positive insight into their physical and mental health as compared to the non-practitioners. Earlier yoga used to focus only

on spiritual wellbeing but now the focus had shifted to mental and physical wellbeing too. In a survey conducted by Newswire, 56% of the yoga practitioners participated in the yoga sessions to relieve stress, 52% of the people took the sessions to for physical and mental support and 49% to become healthier and fitter.⁷

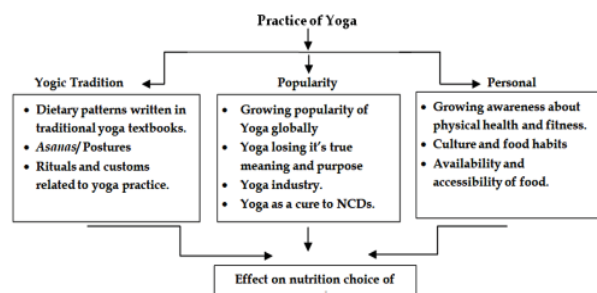
Yoga and eating disorders:

The main types of eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia and some other unidentified disorders. Yoga is proven to have improved eating disorders. A study conducted among 158 women who practiced yoga regularly had a more positive outlook on their body and had a higher level of self acceptance.⁸ However, yoga can only decrease the severity of these disorders but cannot wholly terminate the illness.

Yoga as an industry

The yoga industry is now worth of around \$80 billion. Yoga in the western world has become a luxury. According to data from Eventbrite, an average yoga practitioner spends about \$40 on single yoga session.

Today in the corporate world, the diseases like cardiac problems, diabetes, cancer and obesity and depression are constantly increasing and are causing lot of loss in the businesses. Now there are millions of yoga studios in the cities all around the world and many were reported to promote branded foods saying that they balance energy levels and cleanse the body and more. Many organic food companies are also promoting their products to the people practicing yoga.⁹ Many corporate offices now include yoga sessions for their employees. There is a mix of the eastern practice of yoga with the western business world. The yoga studios represent a blend of style and fashion with sustainable and holistic values. Yoga from spiritual pursuit has now changed into a body centric pursuit and many companies are now benefitting from it.⁶



The above framework described how the practice of Yoga affects the people's nutrition choice.

Limitation

The study is based on limited secondary data and thus the level of generalisability is small.

CONCLUSION

Yoga has close relationship with diet and nutrition coming from the ancient scripts and different asanas. Along with improving mindfulness and stress management, Yoga also improves digestion and encourages the person to have healthier food. However, Yoga has now lost its true essence and has become a way of weight loss. Many brands are promoting different food items to compliment weight loss along with yoga. The true principles of yoga are based on finding peace and calmness. The NCDs increased among the people all around the globe especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Yoga should be made compulsory in all the schools and children must be taught yoga a young age. This will make them healthy humans in the future and increase their productivity. On the other hand, the underlying principle must be taught to the people so that yoga does not turn into a mere way of losing weight.

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