

Spring *into* Summer with Yoga

Emma Palmer, Principal of The Moksha Yoga Academy, explores how the simple practice of yoga can have a profoundly restorative effect on the body as the seasons change

Over the years, research has documented how yoga can be an excellent healing modality in its own right, underpinned by the recognition of the body's capacity for self-healing and acting as a great preventative to the common symptoms of seasonal change. Read on to discover some of the key physiological changes experienced as we migrate into warmer weather, and how a consistent yoga practice can support this organic process.

Yoga as an immune system support

When we think about immunity, we commonly think about cold and flu symptoms associated with winter. However, these can also be prevalent in warmer months partly due to increased proliferation of airborne bacteria from air-conditioned environments, and intermittent changes in outside temperature as the seasons adjust. Bacteria that cause these symptoms circulate around the natural temperature of the body between 36° C - 37° C. The heating component of strong Asana practice taught in a Vinyasa style helps to destroy these bacteria, subsequently boosting the body's own innate immune defence.

Furthermore, yoga stabilises a hormone called cortisol, produced by the adrenal glands during acute, long-term stress and an immunosuppressant. Yoga practices have been well documented for their regulation of cortisol levels, by increasing the function of the parasympathetic nervous system response through postures such as standing and seated forward bends, lateral flexing postures, inversions and therapeutic pranayama such as the Full Yogic Breath.

Lateral flexing postures and inversions, accompanied by standing and seated spine twists, facilitate the body's natural gastrointestinal immunity. 'Good' bacteria known as gut flora, found in the large intestine, stimulate lymphatic tissue, producing antibodies to engulf and destroy pathogens that potentially compromise immunity. In addition, spine twists to the left side of the body massage the descending colon and spleen; an organ that is an integral part of immune defense as it filters and cleanses the blood while massaging the pancreas to assist in regulating blood sugar levels. Twisting to the right, however, compresses the major organs of elimination such as the liver, gall bladder and ascending colon.

A Vinyasa practice also generates the subtle, internal heat of Agni, the 'digestive fire' responsible for transporting and absorbing nutrients and minerals, while increasing the removal of waste products. Additionally, Samana Vayu is one of the major pranas that increases the life force of digestion, cell metabolism and nutrient absorption while regulating heat in the body.

Yoga as a detoxification process

Through the winter months, the body is designed to move into survival mode, which is a natural instinct to prevent starvation, with an increased

need for sleep and a simultaneous boost to immunity. Consequently, digestive function becomes sluggish and weight gain is more prevalent during this time. Additionally, the skin may feel dehydrated from exposure to synthetic heating, and bacterial infections are more likely to affect the upper and/or lower respiratory system. The body may therefore have a greater need for rest in order to cater for these internal changes, which may be why we are less inclined to exercise during winter. A consistent, perennial yoga practice, however, attempts to prevent these symptoms from arising.

As spring arrives, regular practice is a great way to support the major organs of elimination and detoxification by reducing stress and tightness within the musculoskeletal system, stimulating the tissues to release unwanted waste products, increasing nutrient transport and systemic circulation, and infusing fresh oxygen into the bloodstream. The heating practice of Asana increases cardiovascular and respiratory function, stimulating muscular effort and subsequent oxygen transport in addition to intensifying fat metabolism efficiency. This process in turn stimulates perspiration and subsequent detoxification through the major internal organs and the skin.

Due to the high intensity of a strong Asana sequence in conjunction with breath and Bandha (internal locks), greater energy is required. A stored form of energy called glycogen is made primarily in the liver and muscles and acts to support muscular endurance and the metabolism of fats that may have resulted in excess weight gain more commonly experienced in the winter months.

ASANA

Yoga postures

VINYASA

Series of postures that flow from one to the other, synchronising each movement with the breath

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

A division of the nervous system responsible for the relaxation response in the body

PRANAYAMA

Breath control exercises often incorporated in a yoga practice

SAMANA VAYU

Subtle energetic force within the body responsible for particular function. There are different Vayus within the subtle energetic body and each is involved in a different function

BANDHA

Internal lock, for example, drawing the naval toward the spine, is an internal lock known as Uddiyana Bandha

SAMASTHITI

Established equilibrium – which can be translated as 'to stand in balanced stillness'



Movement never lies. It is the barometer telling the state of the Souls Weather

– Martha Graham





A consistent, holistic, educated practice has the capacity to bring about enormous health benefits



Furthermore, Pranayama practices increase physical and mental endurance as the body moves through challenging sequences of postures, in addition to encouraging the lungs to detoxify.

Yoga as a preventative medicine to hay fever

Hay fever is an allergic reaction to airborne substances such as pollen, that irritate the upper respiratory – eyes, nose, throat and sinuses – causing itching and an increase in mucous production. This inflammatory response is caused by an increase in a white blood cell known as histamine, produced in the presence of irritants and designed to engulf and destroy any bacteria in the mucous membranes. Symptoms of hay fever tend to be more prevalent in the morning, due to histamine released around 11pm the night before, resulting in waking to the symptoms of overnight reactivity and high pollen counts predominant in the early hours of the morning.

Although Asana and Pranayama are not our first aid responders to this inflammatory process, they can act as a powerful preventive prior to the onset of symptoms. Yoga's powerful immune-strengthening properties help support the lymphatic and immune systems by regulating white blood cell production as well as strengthening the lower and upper respiratory tracts with pranayama practices.

In the event of an acute inflammatory reaction such as hay fever, a gentle, restorative, cooling practice is an effective therapeutic tool, while postures such as inversions and standing forward bends should be avoided. However, postures that encourage the nervous system to move into parasympathetic dominance such as seated forward bends, standing balancing postures and gentle spine twists, aid the body to restore to equilibrium and homeostasis once more.

Yoga and a good night's sleep

Establishing a healthy sleeping pattern is essential in maintaining overall health and wellbeing and one of the most common benefits yoga offers is a significant improvement in the quality of sleep. Melatonin is a hormone produced at night by the pineal gland and is responsible for regulating our daily sleep-wake cycles, in addition to being a powerful antioxidant with anti-ageing properties. To follow the cycles of melatonin production an active, heating practice is considered to be most beneficial between the hours of 7-9am or 5-7pm, and a more gentle, restorative practice between 7-9pm; however, other health and occupational factors must also be considered. Due to the location of this gland in the brain, Asana that invert the torso such as inversions, standing forward bends and some back bends such as Matsyasana (Fish Pose) support this biorhythmic process, particularly significant for those who experience Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in winter.

There is a reason why flowing water never stagnates; movement of the body and breath through yoga practices underpins the philosophy of health and healing as an empowering way of taking care of our own wellbeing as we move through the seasons of change. It is my experience that students achieve maximum benefit from an individualised therapeutic prescription of postures and breathing practices versus a 'one size fits all' approach, particularly with a clinical presentation of other health concerns. A consistent, holistic, educated practice has the capacity to bring about enormous health benefits paradoxically taking us back to the Samasthiti (same state) of being, back to our origin and back to ourselves. **NH**

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