

Iyengar yoga: the waist-trimming

Nigella swears by the yoga style that promises a long, lean physique and flexibility into old age. Peta Bee tries it out

Nigella Lawson's slim new figure is not down to fasting or cutting carbs. So what is behind her latest transformation? In the November issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, the nation's most glamorous TV cook says that her secret is simple. "I have never been on a diet to try to lose weight. I feel like I haven't lost weight, but I'm possibly in better shape," she says. "I am doing a rather slow form of yoga now called Iyengar."

Quietly and without the overt commercialisation of some yoga brands, Iyengar is among the most popular yoga forms in the world, and Nigella isn't the only celebrity to discover its ability to lengthen limbs and tighten stomachs. Madonna is a fan, as are Jennifer Aniston, Andie MacDowell and Joanna Lumley. More so than many other varieties of yoga, Iyengar also focuses on perfecting alignment, improving posture and rehabilitation after injury. It appeals to men as much as women. The precise strengthening postures have attracted sports stars such as Ryan Giggs, Joe Hart and Rio Ferdinand, and the New Zealand rugby union team. The ballet dancer Alessandra Ferri, who is 52 and still a star ballerina, credits it for helping to extend her career.

For the well-connected, the fitness oasis is the Iyengar Yoga Institute, tucked away at the end of a narrow cobbled lane in the leafy enclave of Maida Vale, west London. Classes are snapped up immediately, and if you manage to grab a place you can expect your mat to be sandwiched between those of glamorous local mummies who have heard about its glute-lifting effect, top athletes and the hard-worked bodies of the nearby Notting Hill and Primrose Hill sets. Despite being the first purpose-built yoga centre in Europe when it opened 30 years ago, until recently its light-flooded studios were known only to an army of hardcore enthusiasts. But word has spread. As I wait for my class to start, a bewildered receptionist is fielding calls from model agencies and glossy magazine editors all trying to secure a place on the most sought-after class in town. Many of the 50 or more weekly classes are booked up the minute they become available and there has been a sharp uptake in the number of first-timers trying taster classes and in those signing up to be members.

Developed by the pioneering yoga teacher BKS Iyengar, the white-haired, bendy-bodied guru from Karnataka in India who is credited with introducing yoga as we know it to the West, the underlying principles are that yoga

should be accessible and achievable for everyone and easily incorporated into a western lifestyle. Iyengar started practising the 2,000-year-old tradition of postures after a series of childhood illnesses and began teaching in the 1930s in Mysore, India. Over the next three decades he honed the way he taught traditional postures, documenting new methods that used aids such as blocks and ropes to help people to achieve them. In the 1960s he published his book *Light On Yoga*, which became an international bestseller. With 500 pages of detailed instruction and photographs of postures, it was the first yoga publication of its kind. It is still regarded as something of a bible and dipped into by millions of people around the world.

None of Iyengar's postures is unique. You will find the headstands, shoulder stands and other moves typical of the approach in other types of yoga class. What distinguishes it is that it aims to work every part of your body systematically, giving great muscle definition without adding bulk. It is methodical, the very antithesis of the fast-moving, posture-packed versions to

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Iyengar is fantastic for correcting posture and balancing weak spots



Slimline: Nigella has taken up Iyengar yoga

Three Iyengar poses to try at home



Peta Bee

Tree pose

(*Vrksa*)

Improves balance, but also strengthens the spine, thighs, calves and ankles for better posture

Stand up, feet together. Breathe deeply. Place your right foot with your heel and toe in line with your left ankle. With your right hand, lift your right leg and place it on your inner left thigh so that your knee is as close to right angles to the floor as you can manage. If this is too difficult, lower your right foot to just above knee or calf height (not on the knee). Push your left thigh into your right foot and vice versa, to help to maintain balance. Place palms together and take your arms over your head for balance. Focus on an object in front of you and hold for at least 90 seconds, breathing deeply all the time. Repeat on the other side, then repeat the entire move twice more.



Extended side-bend pose

(*Utthita Parsvakonasana*)

Lengthen the muscles between the ribs and pelvis, including parts of the lower back, and open the sides of the ribcage, improving ribcage mobility and lung function. Better breathing and posture are the result.

Stand with legs wide apart, feet parallel. Turn your right toes in slightly and move your left foot at right angles so that it is facing away from you. Bend your right knee to right angles so that it is directly over your foot, raising your arms until they are parallel to the floor. Keep facing forwards. To progress the move, bend lower, placing your right hand behind your right foot and extending your left arm overhead, palms downwards. Hold for as long as is comfortable. Aim for at least 90 seconds, breathing deeply. Repeat on the other side, then repeat the entire move three times.

exercise class the A-listers love

which the fitterati have flocked in recent years, and its regimen of precise alignment and deliberate sequencing is reputed to be fantastic for correcting posture, balancing the body's weak spots and for rehabilitation after injury. It is especially good for fixing problems linked to desk-hunching or keyboard tapping. A study this year by researchers at the Institute of Global Health at the University of Geneva found Iyengar yoga to be an effective way of healing back and neck pain when compared with control groups. While it won't burn calories in the same way as, say, Ashtanga (which is a dynamic, demanding form of yoga, with a cardio workout and resistance training in one), it is hardcore and can do wonders for tightening the stomach muscles, shaping the upper arms and giving the illusion that you have grown longer and leaner.

Nigella's claim that she just does a bit of Iyengar "in a very slow way, sometimes, lying down" is deceptive. It's harder than you might think. Even in my basic class, props such as bolsters, harnesses and blocks are used to increase awareness of your positioning and to make the poses accessible. There's a stronger emphasis on accuracy than I have experienced in other yoga, to the point that the edges of your mat must Iyengar involves noting a position for what seems like forever — in our class, one to three minutes is not unusual — while practising strict breath control and repeating each pose three to four times. Unlike Bikram, with its fixed order and poses, there is no strict format to follow. Instructors dip into the catalogue of

“Nigella isn't the only celebrity to discover its ability to tighten stomachs and lengthen limbs

200-plus poses outlined by BKS Iyengar, according to their preference and the ability of their class. "Each instructor will bring a different set of postures in a different order to each class," says Judy Lynn, who is teaching this morning's beginners' lesson. "Don't expect a set format to the order of teaching." Many consider the diversity of the poses to be Iyengar's most therapeutic attribute. All its teachers are trained to understand biomechanics, which positions are most likely to cause injuries, and how to modify them by tweaking your technique. They dispense instructions in a more clinical fashion than you might typically expect from yoga, repeating advice until it eventually clicks. There is little risk of overuse injuries when claim you can stick with it for life.

Indeed, another of my instructors is Elisabeth Wengersky, who is 83, remarkable not only for her age-defying appearance but for her flexibility. Wengersky took up Iyengar yoga in 1978 and has been teaching it since 1996. With her chic white bob and enviable physique, she would not look out of place among a class of women a third her age. There can't be many 83-year-olds with bodies as flexible and well conditioned as hers. "Iyengar teaches progression," she says. "It's a matter of building layer upon layer." There is no limit, she says, to the age at which you can get the most out of your body. BKS Iyengar died last year, aged 95, staying true to his belief that daily yoga practice "will keep old age at bay" by working on his own body for three hours a day and teaching for many more. Nearing 90, he could still pipe-cleaner his body into a backbend and hang upside down on a rope swing for 20 minutes or more.

The thought leaves me feeling inadequate. Wengersky pulls and pushes my hips and shoulders into position with minute tweaks that produce a stretch deeper than I have felt in years. There is, she assures me, no need to head straight for the endpoint. "You need to build up, to learn the progressions correctly before you attempt full asanas [poses]."

Our studio is adorned with black-and-white pictures of a wiry Iyengar contorting himself with ropes, hanging upside down and doing impossible backbends. As I withstand the head rush that comes with holding a shoulder stand for several minutes at the end of the 90-minute class, I realise that I have pushed myself to the point of achiness, to that level of muscle fatigue you might assume you would get only at bootcamp or in a spin class. Yet there's a long way to go. I could well be back for more.

Find a class: iyengaryoga.org.uk; Iyenga Yoga Institute (iy.org.uk)

Yoga — what's your type?

Hatha

What is it?

The most traditional and basic style. Hatha has long been known as a good starting point for beginners. The practice has its roots in 15th-century India, and untouched asanas (postures) are combined with meditation and pranayama (breathing techniques).

Who does it?

Traditionalists and celebrities including Miranda Kerr (below) and Ricky Martin.

What it does for your body

It has been shown significantly to improve flexibility, muscular strength and balance after only a couple of months. Studies have also suggested that it can have a positive effect on depression sufferers.

Kundalini

What is it?

The postures and meditations in this style are designed to awaken "kundalini" energy in the spine — the theory being that this will help us to reach our full potential in our lives. Although its principles have appeared in Hindu textbooks dating back to the 12th century, it was made popular in the West in the 1960s by Yogi Bhaajan.

Who does it?

Russell Brand, Demi Moore, Christy Turlington, Rachel McAdams, Michelle Williams and Jake Gyllenhaal are a few who love the practice's spiritual approach.

What it does for your body

The focus of Kundalini is on breathing techniques such as alternate nostril breathing, and this, combined with chanting and meditation, is meant to reduce stress and help you to relax. Some of the postures are held for more than ten minutes at a time, so stamina is improved.

Vinyasa

What is it?

Literally meaning "breath-synchronised movement", Vinyasa is used to describe any flowing form of

yoga. The class focuses on the sun salutation series of postures, with each posture held for an extended period and no break between asanas.

Who does it?

Adam Levine, Drew Barrymore (right) and Ellen DeGeneres are a few of the devotees.

What it does for your body

The repetitive nature of the practice and continuous flow creates a relaxed, meditative mindset.

Bikram

What is it?

Bikram, also known as hot yoga, was created by the Indian (now millionaire) yogi Bikram Choudhury in the 1970s. Twenty-six Hatha postures are performed in a room heated to 38-45C (100-113F), and it is a favourite with those who like to feel as if they've had a proper workout.

George Clooney, Harry Styles and Lady Gaga.

What it does for your body

The temperatures and effort transform this into an aerobic-style practice, so Bikram is great for weight loss. While those with high blood pressure or diabetes should avoid it, it can help to burn up to 600 calories an hour.

Ashtanga

What is it?

Ashtanga yoga involves synchronising the breath with six progressively more difficult series of postures. Each series takes between 90 minutes and three hours to complete and is designed to make you sweat.

Who does it?

Julianne Moore, Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow embrace its cardio properties.

What it does for your body

Improves circulation, calms the mind and, because it is dynamic, creates a cardio workout and resistance training in one.

The sweat is supposed to purify and detox muscles and organs.

Yin yoga

What is it?

Yin yoga comes from the Taoist tradition and is practised sitting or lying on the floor. It has much in common with meditation and mindfulness practices, and



poses are held for between two and 20 minutes, with a focus on flexibility.

Who does it?

While favoured by athletes, Yin yoga is suitable for all, although some of the stretches can be challenging.

What it does for your body

Increases flexibility, focuses the mind, and the asanas and breathing techniques target the

Jivamukti

What is it?

Less than 35 years old, Jivamukti was co-founded by the American yoga teachers David Life and Sharon Gannon. Often performed to music, the practice is a combination of Hatha postures, Sanskrit chanting and elements of philosophy.

Who does it?

Uma Thurman, whose brother is a Jivamukti teacher, Sarah Jessica Parker, Heidi Klum, and Sting (below) and his wife Trudie Styler.

What it does for your body

More of a workout than some of the other practices, many are attracted to the intellectually stimulating classes, which are also known for their stress-relieving effects on the mind.

Restorative yoga

What is it?

Small classes are designed to heal back injuries, easing stress or solving digestive problems. The body is gently stretched through poses held for longer than usual to heal the body.

Who does it?

Those seeking to heal a specific problem or anyone under a lot of stress. Salma Hayek is a fan of the practice.

What it does for your body

Postures are designed to target problem areas and alleviate stress through meditation. A recent study implied that the practice improved the sleep patterns of cancer patients.



Seated pose (Sukha)

Relaxation and stress relief. Reduces tension in the upper back and shoulders. It's a good pose to do at night and could help you to sleep.

Sit comfortably with legs loosely crossed. Relax your shoulders so they are away from your ears and keep your spine straight. Settle your mind and breathe deeply, settling a slow and easy pace of breathing. Place palms together and in front of your chest. Remain seated and continue observing your breath for five minutes or longer.

