

STRENGTHEN YOUR STRIDE

Chances are you've heard it before – doing yoga is one of the best ways to ward off running injuries. But did you know the ancient discipline can boost run-specific strength and mental prowess, too? **Sarah Ivory** explains how slowing down could help you to speed up

Approximately 30 million people worldwide practice yoga, reaping body benefits that range from reduced stress and boosted brain power to increased flexibility and strength. But because most forms of yoga don't involve heavy sweating, gasping for air and, most importantly, putting one foot in front of the other, many runners are reluctant to swap miles on the roads for moments on the mat. "I don't think the benefits of yoga are really understood," claims Christine Felstead, long-distance runner and yoga instructor at yogaforrunners.com. "People think of it as restorative and meditative but it's actually more useful to runners as a cross-training activity. It's only when people get to a yoga class that they realise just how physical it is."

So how does the discipline improve running ability? It's all down to the balancing effect yoga has on the body; strengthening weak muscles and lengthening tight muscles helps increase run efficiency and lower risk of injury. "Yoga is very good at addressing structural imbalances and promoting better diaphragmatic function," explains Nahid de Belgeonne, founder of Good Vibes Fitness. "Muscles that are under-used when you run are activated when you do yoga, and there's an emphasis on rotation and extension that's particularly beneficial."



Body in balance

Yoga's biggest contributions to running are its abilities to boost whole-body strength and counteract fascial tightness. Repetitive pounding on pavements creates tension in the same areas of the body – calves, quads, hamstrings, iliotibial band and hip flexor muscles – that often leads to musculoskeletal imbalances. As a result, many runners have a limited range of motion and an increased risk of repetitive strain injuries like patella tendonitis (runner's knee). "A common misconception among runners is that their leg muscles are strong," reveals Felstead, "but runners are only using a relatively small group of lower-body muscles in a repeated fashion. It often comes as a surprise that they can't, for example, do a lunge without swaying from side-to-side. Suddenly the runner realises that, yes, some muscles in the legs are strong but other muscles are under-utilised."

In fact, research shows runners often have tight

inner thigh muscles and, during bouts of long distance training, under-active gluteal muscles. And that's not all. "Many runners don't use parts of their body at all, like the core and upper body muscles," adds Felstead. "This is why yoga is the perfect complement to running – balanced poses will strengthen what is weak, stretch out what is tight and bring the entire body back to balance."

How does it work? In order to stay stable in a yoga pose, muscles must work in a balanced way – some contract and strengthen; others stretch and lengthen. Take the downward dog pose – during this popular pose, muscles in the triceps, shoulders, lower back and front of the legs work as stabilisers (contract and strengthen), while those in the biceps, upper back and back of the legs work as mobilisers (stretch and lengthen). It's this stretching and strengthening of the body from head-to-toe that leads to better form, stronger running and fewer injuries.



THE DOWNWARD DOG POSE STRETCHES AND STRENGTHENS THE BODY

"Balanced poses will strengthen what is weak, stretch out what is tight and bring the entire body back to balance"

Take a breath

The other key benefit you will get from yoga is a better breathing technique. Breathing may seem like a no-brainer but many runners fail to optimise their full lung capacity. The problem? Research from Brunel University shows that poor use of the respiratory muscles can lead to leg muscle weakness over distance. "Runners, and people in general, tend to inhale from the chest area," explains Felstead, "and this limits breathing to the top portion of the lungs. Yogic breathing teaches you to use the lower portion of your lungs where there's plenty of blood capillaries to transport oxygen. I believe this improves lung capacity."

In addition to helping you take deeper breaths, yoga also improves posture. The benefit? Running tall will open up the chest area and allow for a greater inhalation of oxygenated air. "Something



as simple as correcting your posture will put your spine in a better location and your lungs in a more efficient position for breathing optimally," agrees Felstead.

But it's not all about getting air into the lungs – shallow breathing patterns can also activate the sympathetic (fight or flight) nervous system and increase levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, in the body. "In nearly all yoga practices, there is an emphasis on pranayama (the movement of breath) and a long exhale," says Belgeonne. "This supports the parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system and activates the relaxation response." How does this translate to better running? Easy – staying relaxed is essential to good running form. When you tense your shoulders or clench your fists, you change the way you run and muscles you recruit, which in turn reduces your overall performance. "When you're focusing on a really tough yoga pose, the natural reaction is to hold your breath. This causes the body to tighten and is therefore counterproductive," adds Felstead. "Yoga teaches you to keep breathing through those challenging poses. Then, when you're in a race situation, you'll do the same thing. So, before you get to the stage where you go into the anaerobic zone, you'll listen to your body and take some deeper breaths to oxygenate muscles."

The mind matters

The good news is that yoga doesn't only work on a physical level, it also works on a psychological one. "Yoga, like running, has an internal focus," explains Belgeonne. "Many runners notice that the feeling of entering 'the zone' when they run is replicated on their yoga mat. They enjoy the full-body commitment and mood-boosting qualities that yoga shares with running." Don't take it from us; take it from model Christy Turlington. The A-list starlet, who is a keen marathon runner and yoga practitioner, raves about the meditative link between both activities. "The last few years I've trained for a couple of marathons and really enjoyed it. But I think I sort of integrated yoga and the feeling I get from yoga into the running," the star told *Cosmopolitan* US magazine. Turns out yoga gives runners more than just physical strength, it provides mental fortitude and focus as well. "The yoga mat is like a microcosm of your life," says Felstead, "because you learn to be with just yourself, and this creates many parallels with running. When you're running it's just you, your mind and your breathing – it's exactly the same during a yoga sequence."

There is a catch – when you do yoga, prepare to silence your competitive side. "The average runner is quite tight and needs to be aware of their physical limitations in a yoga class," says Felstead. "It might be effortless for a conditioned yogi to move their foot



LOOK OUT FOR SPECIFIC CLASSES AND WORKSHOPS AIMED AT RUNNERS

Pick up a pace

Find a style of yoga that moves at your pace. The runner's body tends to be quite tight, and it might take you time to move efficiently from one pose to another. If you're new to yoga and you go to a class that is too fast moving, you risk doing the pose incorrectly. Try a strength-focused vinyasa class if you have some yoga experience. Look for a slower class that hones in on proper alignment, like iyengar yoga, if you're a beginner.

Find the right teacher

Find an instructor who has an athletic background. Look out for specific classes and workshops aimed at runners. And if your instructor tries to tell you how bad running is for your body, walk away. Running is a fantastic sport and you need to find an instructor who understands that your goal isn't to be super-bendy but to run more efficiently.

Be prepared to change

Tried yoga and didn't fall in love with it? Don't judge every style of yoga because your first experience didn't hit the mark. If the first class you tried didn't work for you, try a different style. There's a form of yoga out there for everyone. ●

"Yoga taught me to run harder!"

Name: Catherine Wilding
Age: 42
Running club: Serpentine

"I started practicing yoga eight years ago, just after I began running seriously, and it soon became as important to me as running. What started as a way to stretch my hamstrings, quickly took on a much greater significance. Yoga helped me to focus on the physical aspect of running, and stopped me from letting negative thoughts slow me down and sabotage my race results. There is also no doubt that yoga helps improve my flexibility and all-round strength. Plus, it's a great way to balance the physicality of running and slow things down."

home – even if I can only squeeze in 10 minutes of yoga in the morning or after a run. I like to try different styles of yoga, too, as they all offer different benefits. Most of the classes I practice are dynamic vinyasa or ashtanga classes, but I also enjoy iyengar yoga. I enjoy yoga for what it is and the many benefits it offers my mind and body. It's no longer just about how it helps my running."

Want to maximise performance with yoga? Read Christine Felstead's book *Yoga for Runners*. Available from amazon.co.uk for £13.99

"I now try to practice as often as I can. I aim to do at least four classes a week and some sequences at



"...correcting your posture will put your spine in a better location and your lungs in a more efficient position..."



LEARNING TO BREATHE CORRECTLY WILL BENEFIT ALL RUNNERS

from downward dog into a forward lunge, but a runner may need to take some steps to change poses. This is a problem because runners are competitive with themselves and run the risk of getting hurt if they push the body beyond its limits." Unlike running, yoga is not a competitive sport. It's not about being the most flexible or strongest on the mat. Instead, the key focus of your yoga practice should always be on how your body feels and what is right for it at that moment in time. "This form of body awareness can be very helpful for runners," adds Belgeonne. "They learn to tune into their bodies as they move, becoming more attentive to tight areas. A runner can then react to niggles and avoid injury." Nifty.

Yoga action plan

From flowing vinyasa classes to restorative yoga or the sweaty Bikram variety, the yoga scene is a minefield. "There's one word – yoga – but it can mean so many different things," agrees Felstead. "Sitting meditating – that's yoga. Doing breath work – that's yoga. Mastering acrobatics – yes that can be yoga too. Although the principles are mostly the same, there's a full spectrum of yogic types that require different levels of physical ability." Harness Felstead's top tips to find the right class for you.

STRIKE A POSE

Give hard-working muscles a good stretch with these restorative poses from Nahid de Belgeonne, founder of Good Vibes (www.goodvibesfitness.co.uk)

BANANA POSE



Runners hold tightness within the lateral myofascial line (the fascia tissue that runs up the side of the body). This pose helps by loosening the IT band, obliques and intercostal muscles.

TO DO IT Lie in the centre of your mat and walk both legs over to the right side. Keeping the pelvis in place, take your upper body over to the right side with arms overhead. You should be in a banana shape. Hold the left wrist with your right hand and cross right ankle over left. Relax for one to five minutes then swap sides.



LEGS UP THE WALL POSE

This is a great remedy for tired legs, shin splints, sore feet and achy ankles. Blood from the lower body is circulated with help from gravity to the heart and head, instantly reviving your system.

TO DO IT Sit close to a wall and carefully swing your legs straight up onto the wall, inching your bottom close to the wall. Prop a cushion under your head and let your legs relax. If your hamstrings are too tight to keep the legs straight, bend your knees or pop them over the seat of a chair instead.

PSOAS LUNGE



The psoas muscle runs from the thoracic spine to the top of the thigh bone and attaches to the diaphragm. Lengthen it and improve breathing with this stretch.
TO DO IT Crouch on all fours and step one foot forward between your hands. Align your

knee directly above the ankle and take a moment to lift the toes. Then plant toes firmly on the mat, grounding the bones of the front foot downwards. Shift the back knee further backward, lift your upper body and place both hands lightly on the front thigh. Lift both arms skywards for three to five breaths, then repeat pose on the other side.



LYING HAMSTRING STRETCH

Runners often have tight hamstrings. This pose lengthens the posterior chain muscles – those on the backs of the legs.
TO DO IT Lie on your back with your head on a block and grasp one knee with both hands to bring it toward your chest. Lengthen the other leg on the mat and flex the foot towards the sky. Place a yoga strap around the ball of the foot by your chest and extend the leg upwards, holding the strap with equal length in both hands. Keep the pelvis down. Hold for five to 10 breaths.