

Energising Reviving Uplifting



It's been proven to deliver all of the above... and give you a fabulous youthful body, but the latest buzz about yoga is how it can help de-age your brain. Best of all, you can get results in just 12 minutes a day

WORDS SALLY BROWN

YOGA IS DEFINITELY HAVING A MOMENT

From boardrooms to church halls, you'll find all ages, shapes and sizes in downward dog or doing the cat. It seems we just can't get enough of this ancient practice that's good for mind, body and soul. Yoga really does seem to offer the whole package – as well as toning and strengthening the body, improving posture and mobility and reducing chronic pain, it also soothes

stress and anxiety. There's been a whole raft of research into its benefits over the past decade – done regularly, yoga can lower your risk of heart disease, reduce back pain, improve asthma, support the immune system, boost mood, lower anxiety and beat insomnia, as well as helping you lose weight and improve your eating habits.

But the hot news is that one kind of yoga could also help to stave off Alzheimer's. Just 20 minutes a day of Kundalini yoga reversed the early signs of dementia, according to a 'UCLA' study published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*.

Researchers took a group of people aged over 55 who were dealing with the kind of niggly, everyday memory blips that aren't serious, but can still be frustrating – blanking on names, forgetting appointments, misplacing car keys (or the car). We may laugh these off as Senior Moments, but they can also be a warning flag – people with mild cognitive impairment are two and a half times more likely to develop Alzheimer's.

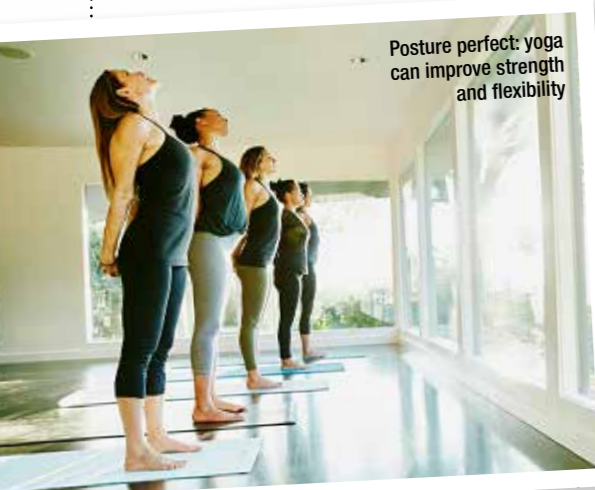
At the start of the study, the volunteers underwent memory tests and brain scans. Then they were divided into two groups. The first were

given 20 minutes of brain training exercises, such as word association games, to do at home every day. The second group attended a weekly, hour-long Kundalini yoga class, and then practised a short Kundalini meditation exercise called Kirtan Kriya, every day at home.

After 12 weeks, both groups were better at memorising words and names. But MRI scans showed that the yoga group had significantly improved their brain connectivity, suggesting that the changes would be longer lasting. They also experienced an additional benefit – significant improvements in their visual-spatial memory skills, which makes driving and navigating much easier. Plus the yoga group reduced their levels of depression and anxiety and showed increased resilience to stress.

THE 12-MINUTE MEMORY BOOSTER

Kundalini classes involve chanting in Sanskrit, repeating simple repetitive phrases, such as Sat Nam (Truth is my identity) or Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō



(I call upon the divine wisdom) in a sort of tuneless singing voice. But it's worth getting over the cringe factor because it's the chanting that brings the benefits. 'When you practise the mantra, the tongue is pushed against the roof of the mouth and that stimulates around 30,000 nerve endings and around 80 reflexology points, so the whole body benefits,' says Kundalini teacher Mariya Gancheva, who combines teaching yoga with a job as an investment banker in the City of London. 'But it's also a very effective form of meditation – focusing your mind on repeating the sounds means it's less likely to wander off.'

In Kirtan Kriya, a type of Kundalini, there is also a sequence of hand positions called mudras, which involve touching the thumb to the pads of your fingertips, that you coordinate with the chants. According to Professor Helen Lavretsky, who carried out the UCLA study, the mantra-mudra combination enhances production of a protein in the brain that stimulates connections between neurons. It's also thought to regenerate activity in the telomeres, the end-bit of our DNA that helps slow down the ageing process. In a previous study, practising 12 minutes of Kirtan Kriya daily for eight weeks boosted telomere activity by 44%.

'One of the first major changes I noticed when I started doing Kundalini regularly was my memory improving,' says Mariya. 'I started remembering phone numbers without really trying. My focus and concentration at work has also improved. I work on the trading floor, and it's full-on for eight hours. I used to rely on coffee to keep me sharp; now my energy levels are naturally high all day.'

On paper, Kundalini yoga certainly sounds appealing – for a start, Lycra is optional, and participants are encouraged to wear loose-fitting clothing in natural fibres. It's often done on a soft sheepskin rug instead of the traditional rubber yoga mat to minimise stress on the joints (Demi Moore has been snapped carrying hers rolled up between classes).

There's also nothing fast-paced about it – rather than rattling through sweaty sun salutations, you hold postures for longer, while focusing on your breathing. Many of the postures are done from a seated position. The result is a deep and energising feeling of calm. 'It teaches you to focus the mind and not let stress

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] affect how you feel,' says Mariya. 'Kundalini is known as the yoga of awareness. Your body will change, but what people notice first after practising it is that their mind becomes sharper and more awake. You stop spending so much time drifting through life on autopilot.'

Of course, Kundalini is not the only way to improve your memory. Your dementia risk goes down if you don't smoke or overdo the booze, and you are not overweight. Eating a balanced diet with lots of fruit and vegetables and keeping active also protects brain health.

Other types of yoga are also good for your brain - significant improvements in working memory were found in a group of 55 to 79 year olds who practised Hatha yoga and meditation three times a week for eight weeks, compared with a group that



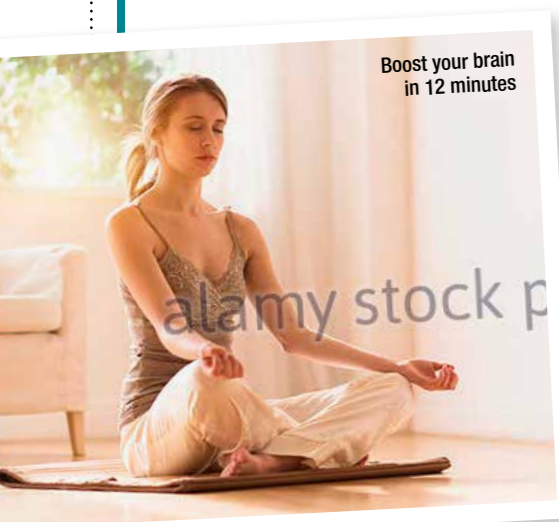
Brain food: a healthy diet helps, too

did a similar amount of stretching. But if your New Year's resolution is to find a new way to relax, or to take up meditation, Kirtan Kriya is simple way to do it in just 12 minutes - we show you how below. It might even help you find your keys!

To find a certified Kundalini teacher near you, put your postcode into 'Search for a class' on kundaliniyoga.org.uk. Or you can find online classes taught by the world's top teachers at kundalinilounge.com.

Chant yourself younger

Researchers found the 12-minute Kirtan Kriya increased blood flow to the area of the brain associated with memory. Here's how to do it...



Boost your brain in 12 minutes

1 Sit cross-legged on a rug on the floor if that's comfortable for you, or in a chair that helps you keep good posture.

2 The words you chant are Saa Taa Naa Maa. When you repeat each syllable, imagine the sound flowing in through the top of your head and out the middle of your forehead (the 'third eye chakra').

3 Place your tongue on the roof of the mouth when you make the sounds. This is thought to stimulate acupuncture points that help rebalance the body.

4 On Saa, touch the index fingers of each hand to your thumbs. On Taa, touch your middle fingers to your thumbs. On Naa, touch your ring fingers to your thumbs. On Maa, touch your little fingers to your thumbs.

5 For two minutes, sing Saa Taa Naa Maa in your normal voice, matching the finger movements to the syllables. Then for the next two minutes, sing in a whisper. Then for the next four minutes, say the sound silently to yourself. Then reverse the order, whispering for two minutes, then out loud for two minutes, for a total of 12 minutes.

6 Finish by taking a deep breath in and stretching your hands above your head, sweeping them down by your sides as you exhale.

ART: PLEASE RETOUCH IMAGE SO THAT IT MATCHES THE FIRST OPENING SHOT - ADD A BIT OF BLUE TO SKY AS PER MOCK UP



'Your body will change, but what people notice first is that their mind becomes sharper and more awake'

Got a problem? There's a yoga for that!

Weight loss, flexibility or stress relief? Here's our guide to the health benefits different yoga classes can deliver...

* BEST FOR FITNESS: FLOW YOGA

Also known as Ashtanga or power yoga, this dynamic class involves a flowing

sequence of set moves that will get your heart rate up and leave you warm and sweaty. Ideal if you want to get fit and tone up. **Find out more:** Visit kpjayi.org or the *British Wheel of Yoga* at bwy.org.uk

* BEST FOR POSTURE: ANUSARA

Classes are based on individual postures rather than flowing sequences, and there is an emphasis on correct alignment. It's underpinned by a philosophy known as the 'Three As': Attitude, Alignment, Action. **Find out more:** Visit anusarayoga.com

* BEST FOR WEIGHT LOSS: BIKRAM

Also known as hot yoga because it's done

in a room heated to sauna temperatures (41°C). The idea is that the heat relaxes your joints, muscles and ligaments, making challenging postures more achievable, so you can push your body to new limits. You'll also sweat buckets and burn calories. **Find out more:** Visit bikramyoga.com

* BEST FOR BEGINNERS: HATHA

Hatha is the generic term given to any type of yoga that involves a sequence of postures, but in recent years, it's become associated with gentler yoga classes that provide a good introduction to the basic postures and breathing techniques. **Find out more:** Visit the *British Wheel of Yoga* at bwy.org.uk

* BEST FOR FLEXIBILITY: IYENGAR

A slow and precise form of yoga that's designed to loosen up even the stiffest physiques. Classes consist of holding different postures for up to two minutes at a time, often working with belts and blocks to help you achieve the right position. **Find out more:** Visit bksiyengar.com; iyengaryoga.org.uk

* BEST FOR STRESS BUSTING: JIVAMUKTI

This places a big emphasis on breathing to help release tension in the body as you work through a sequence of postures. A guided meditation ends the class. **Find out more:** Visit jivamuktityoga.co.uk

Feeling inspired?

A yoga break can restore your mind, body and soul like nothing else. However much time you have to spare, here are our top picks

IF YOU HAVE: HALF AN HOUR

Create your own mini-retreat at home by doing a free class on your laptop with top teacher Esther Ekhart (see her EkhartYoga channel on YouTube). Also worth trying on YouTube: Tara Stiles (TaraStilesYoga), and Adriene Mishler (YogaWithAdriene).

IF YOU HAVE: 24 HOURS

Emmerdale actress and yoga teacher Roxy Shahidi hosts **one-night Strength and Grace retreats** for small groups at Champneys Springs in Leicestershire. Arrive late Friday night and you can pack in five classes, with lots of one-to-one-attention. From £339pp, including meals and use of spa and gym facilities. See champneys.com

IF YOU HAVE: A WEEKEND

One of London's most popular yoga studios, Stretching The City at London's Angel, runs retreats across the south of England. Head to Brooklands Barn in Arundel, West Sussex, which has a yoga studio with heated floor, and an indoor pool. Numbers are capped at 15 to allow for individual instruction. From £349pp for 2 nights. See stretchingthecity.com



Unwind at the Bliss Sanctuary in Bali



Soak in the stunning views at Itha108



Tasty treats on offer at Yeotown

IF YOU HAVE: FOUR DAYS

Yeotown, which runs **retreats every Wednesday to Sunday** at a converted farm near Barnstaple in north Devon, is the creation of Vinyasa Flow teacher Mercedes Sieff from London's Triyoga. The style is rustic chic, with underfloor heating and walk-in showers. Yoga classes form part of a holistic package designed to detox and renew, including nutritious, balanced meals, guided hikes and outdoor fitness classes. From £1,870pp. See yeotown.com

IF YOU HAVE: FIVE DAYS

Ideal for those who like their yoga **fast-paced** - London teacher Scott Johnson from Stillpoint Yoga hosts a four-night Ashtanga Yoga and Mindfulness Retreat at ecoYoga, a five-acre riverside retreat on the west coast of Scotland, blissfully out of reach of mobile phone coverage. The cost is £550pp (£440 accommodation, £110 paid directly to the yoga teacher), including all classes and meals. Pick up from Glasgow Central station costs £30. See ecoyoga.org

IF YOU HAVE: A WEEK OR MORE

Itha108 is a **small retreat on the tiny Greek island of Ithaca**, created by Vinyasa Flow teacher Ingrid Gottschalk. She brings top teachers from all over the world to host six-night retreats for up to 20 people. Winter classes are held in a cosy studio; in Summer, they move to an outdoor platform overlooking the sea. From £580pp, excluding flights but including boat transfers to and from Kefalonia airport. See itha108.com

FOR: A 10-DAY LONG-HAUL TREAT

Head to Bali and the villa-based **Bliss Sanctuary For Women**. Stressed out businesswoman Zoë Watson wanted to create a relaxing space where women would feel comfortable on their own, but it's also the ideal place to visit with friends. Your hostess helps you plan a perfect week from a menu of yoga classes, in-room treatments and sightseeing trips. From £1,680, excluding flights. See blissanctuaryforwomen.com



Chill out in the hot tub at EcoYoga

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