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Hot Yoga: A New Approach to an Age-Old Practice
Robin Bernstein, Medical Writer
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Aaaah, yoga! A dimly lit room. Soft chanting. Relaxing in lotus position. Whoops. Wrong class.

Think bright lights. Loud grunting. Sweaty bodies. Welcome to "hot" yoga. The name, which could easily refer to its growing popularity, actually has more to do with room temperatures that can exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit. No wonder participants are sweating even before they begin their grueling 90-minute workout.

More accurately known as Bikram yoga, it's named for its creator, Bikram Choudhury, a three-time yoga champion and former Olympic weightlifter. He has attracted throngs to his Beverly Hills studio since opening his doors in 1974, including celebrities like Brooke Shields, John MacEnroe, Shirley MacLaine, Martin Sheen, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

According to his Web site, there are more than 80 Bikram studios worldwide, mostly in the United States. Instructors are certified in his 2-month training program--a program said to be rigorous.

Certainly it can be argued that yoga, an ancient discipline with plenty of followers, was doing just fine, thank-you, without turning up the heat. But Choudhury, 54, saw room for improvement. In India, Choudhury worked one on one, teaching each individual a personal "prescription" of yoga postures for a particular medical condition.

But he wanted to find a way to teach an entire group at once--a difficult endeavor, he says, because "you take 20 people, they have 20 different problems."

So he designed a challenging sequence of 26 postures, each repeated twice, to treat every system in the body. He claims his yoga will help avoid, correct, cure, heal, or alleviate the symptoms of almost any illness or injury. "Think of it like penicillin or chicken soup," says Choudhury.

Success Stories Abound

Many studies point to the benefit of repetitive activities such as yoga, which evoke the relaxation response, according to Herbert Benson, MD, of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of the Division of Behavioral Medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

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None of these studies has specifically looked at Bikram yoga, but Choudhury is exploring a research grant proposal with doctors at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. In the meantime, the anecdotal evidence is compelling. Scores of devotees, including many medical professionals, are eager to cite major and unprecedented health improvements.

"The relaxation response can treat successfully any disease to the extent that it's caused or made worse by stress," says Dr. Benson,

noting that most doctor visits are stress related.

Edward Wind, MD, 60, a radiologist in New Hyde Park, New York, and an avid runner, had accepted years of lower back pain as part of aging. But after suffering an agonizing back injury in December 1998, he knew he had to get help. Unsatisfied with the stretching exercises his colleagues recommended, and having never done yoga, Dr. Wind began attending Bikram classes three to four times weekly.

"The yoga has provided me with true pain relief," says Dr. Wind. "Of all the exercises I've done, this one is without a doubt the most healthy." Dr. Wind, who now readily admits an addiction to yoga, believes the change in his health was nearly miraculous.

Likewise, Julian Goldstein, 61, was in bad shape 8 years ago.

"I was disabled. I weighed 285 pounds," says the six-foot tall Goldstein, then a hypertensive type 2 diabetic with a herniated disc and peripheral neuropathy (numbness in his extremities). "I wasn't expecting to be living very much longer."

So he, too, tried Bikram yoga.

"I could hardly bend over," he recalls. Yet before long, his back pain began to disappear. His blood pressure was soon normal and the numbness was gone. After 5 months, he was off insulin completely, without changing his diet. Now at 220 pounds and in excellent health, Goldstein teaches two Bikram classes a day in Encino, California.

Demanding Technique

Bikram instructors make such benefits abundantly clear. As sweat-drenched students in Pete Monsen's year-old Bikram studio in Dix Hills, New York, strain to hold the arduous "triangle" pose, they hear how they are working every muscle, joint, tendon, and organ,

"revitalizing, re-energizing, and reorganizing every cell."

The heat relaxes the muscles and promotes sweating, which releases toxins.

"Yoga is the only exercise that both relaxes you *and* gives you energy," says Monsen, 44, who jokingly refers to his always-packed classes as Bikram's Torture Chamber. But three principles are absolutely essential, he says: holding still in each posture for an extended period, breathing normally during each posture, and resting completely

between postures. The heat, he adds, relaxes the muscles and promotes sweating, which, he says, releases toxins.

Not all yoga disciplines take this strict approach. For instance, "astanga" yoga, or "power" yoga, utilizes flowing movements and eschews the sauna-like setting.

"Yoga is a very broad term. Each style has something to offer," says Lorraine Aguilar, a physical therapist and yoga instructor in Glen Head, New York. "Astanga and Bikram tend to attract people who are looking for more of a workout. Someone going for stress reduction might choose a Kripalu yoga or an eclectic hatha yoga class."

Despite such variety, some health experts question whether yoga alone is enough.

"Yoga is an excellent component of a comprehensive fitness program," says Richard Cotton, spokesperson and exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise in San Diego. "It is the flexibility component." But Cotton also advises adding an aerobic activity like walking, swimming, or biking.

And many urge caution when exercising in heat, especially for those with heart conditions or circulatory problems. "I'm not saying (the heat) is dangerous," says Harvard's Dr. Benson. "I'm saying one has to be careful." Monsen stresses that students are reminded to

drink water during class and are told to stop if they feel dizzy or weak.

Despite its intensity, Bikram yoga continues to draw a fiercely devoted following. "People say it's the toughest exercise they've ever done," says Monsen. "But they stick with it. I'm always amazed at how much they improve and how much better they feel."

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