



# Yoga for weight loss

## Soothing the mind, toning the body

BY LINDA NGUYEN , CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



Natalie Holts, who teaches yoga nearly every night, says the ancient meditation practice has taught her about her diet.

**Photograph by:** Ashley Fraser, Canwest News Service

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Six years ago, yoga teacher Natalie Holts was overweight and depressed.

Her days were spent toiling away at a government job. Most of her evenings involved little more than overeating and watching TV on her couch.

As each year went by, she became increasingly heavy: ultimately, her 5'4" frame ballooned to 150 pounds.

"My work was starting to poison a lot of things in my life. I was just feeling like I was sitting behind my desk and getting a day older," she says. "My life didn't really begin and for a lot of those years, I was just eating due to unhappiness."

When Holts hit the big 3-0, a friend suggested that the two try out a yoga class offered at their local community centre.

The introductory class, which started out as a social event for Holts and a few girlfriends once a week, quickly turned into a passion and new career.

"I was doing something that was getting me off the couch. I realized that I really liked yoga," Holts says. "It went from something that I would only do with friends to wanting to go all the time because my

body missed it."

Today, 36-year-old Holts is 30 pounds lighter, a teacher at Rama Lotus Yoga Centre in Ottawa and much happier.

The practice of yoga is believed to have come from a 5,000-year-old Hindu discipline that concentrates on achieving mind and body peace. In recent years, after being popularized by mega-stars Madonna and Sting, it has turned into a spiritual and physical practice for countless adherents in North America and around the world.

Although not a means to achieve rapid weight loss — for that, cardio exercises such as running are a better choice — yoga can be a weight loss solution for the patient athlete who believes connecting the mind and body will help shed the pounds.

Holts, who teaches yoga nearly every night, says the ancient meditation practice has taught her about her diet.

"Yoga really relaxed and calmed me down. It really got me thinking about food and my approach to food. It showed me that I should be aware of how I am after I eat."

Stephanie Vincec, the owner of Blue Bamboo Yoga, says the "yoga approach" to losing weight is not a conventional one.

"It takes a bit more time to establish that mind-body connection. Instead of calorie counting, you're listening to yourself," she said. "Learning about what foods make you crave if you're overeating because it's an emotional thing. You'll learn to really know when you're satisfied and not eat more."

Vincec says Vinyasa flow or Power Yoga classes are the best choices for people who want to use it to lose weight.

Compared with the more commonly practised Hatha yoga, which emphasizes slow movements and each pose and stretch is held for a few minutes before moving onto the next, Vinyasa or Power Yoga encourages yogis to be continuously moving.

Vincec says it's important to find out if the yoga class you choose focuses on sun salutations, which is a series of half a dozen postures completed with no breaks in-between. She said these classes are more suited for people who have done yoga before and who are not extremely overweight.

Vancouver personal trainer Marc Locquiao says he doesn't recommend yoga for his clients who are looking to shed some pounds.

"There isn't much exertion in yoga. It's more relaxing," says Locquiao, who works at the Langara Family YMCA in Vancouver.

He says if weight-loss is the main goal, people should look at cardiovascular exercises that will keep the heart rate high.

"They would need to exercise more, like going for a run, or biking outside. The exercises need to be continuous in nature, over a long period of time. Diet is also key when it comes to losing weight."

Mountangoat Yoga Centre owner Heather Moore says for more rapid weight loss, people should consider hot yoga, which is taught in a heated room that is 32 C or hotter.

"It's very popular. People love the heat," says Moore from her studio in Ottawa. "It adds to the practice because it allows stretches to go a little deeper and gives the muscles room."

Although Moore does not recommend using only yoga as your only form of aerobics for weight loss: she says it's most beneficial if used in conjunction with other exercise.

"It's a gentler approach to exercise. You're essentially holding your own body weight on your arms and one foot but it's something you need to stick with if you want to build strength, burn calories, gain flexibility and be in a better place of health," she said. "But it's not going to be enough for weight loss on its own."

One of the most noticeable benefits, says Moore, is an increase in flexibility.

"You're going to go about your daily routine and notice that it's a little easier to bend over and tie your shoes," she says. "You're going to feel better in your body and your moods are going to be more uplifted yet feel more grounded."

Melanie Richards, the owner of Happy Tree Yoga in Montreal, says yoga newbies, male or female, should try combination yoga classes, like Yogalates, which mixes traditional yoga techniques with modern Pilates theory.

"It helps you strengthen your core from the side to the torso," she says. "It keeps your heart rate up and teaches you how to control your breath. It'll teach you to become comfortable with yourself."

She says most who come to her 1-1/2-year-old studio aren't looking to lose weight but might be pleasantly surprised.

"In the end, it doesn't matter why people start yoga, whether for weight loss, or they have a cute Lululemon outfit they want to wear or just want to go with a friend," she says. "They'll get all the benefits they want and more."

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