



by Abby Lentz

# YOGA IS NOT A 4-LETTER WORD

*DISCLAIMER: To develop an exercise program that best suits your needs, please consult with your physician. It is important to talk with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.*

Losing weight and improving your health can often be a difficult journey. You may feel limited to the types of exercises you can perform. Yoga is an excellent low-impact exercise to help you strengthen your core and increase flexibility. The benefits of yoga can be yours regardless of your size!



Photo courtesy of Abby Lentz

## What can yoga do for you?

Yoga is a discipline that's thousands of years old. The main physical benefits of yoga are well documented:

- Reduce Stress
- Improve Balance
- Increase Flexibility
- Develop Core Strength

People come to the yoga mat wanting their physical bodies to change. However, it's the feeling of well-being that brings people back to their yoga practice.

When asked, "What do you do?" I often see the look of disbelief creep across faces as I reply, "I'm a yoga teacher." As a woman affected by obesity, I do not fit the image of a yoga teacher, marathoner or triathlete. Yet, that is who I am.

I see this same look of disbelief when I tell a person affected by obesity that they can do yoga right now in the body that they have today. Countless times I've been told that someone would do yoga, but only after they've lost weight. Unfortunately, this eliminates yoga as a tool for reclaiming their health based on their idea that yoga is only for the already thin and flexible. In fact, yoga can be done by everyone — lying in bed, sitting in a wheelchair or standing only for brief moments, the benefits of yoga can still be yours.

## Yoga as a Valuable Tool for Weight-loss

First time yoga students are often surprised at how much energy and effort it takes to come into and hold even the most simple of yoga poses. However, with yoga, it is not just calorie burning that best supports weight-loss.

Often, options to reclaim your health can be overwhelming. What to do is only the beginning of the process, as the answers to “who, where and when” can cloud and confuse the mind — leading to no action at all. The easiest way to quiet the mind for clearer thinking is do Deep Belly Breathing (see sidebar) and focus on the words “inhale” and “exhale” to the rhythm of your breath.

Mindfulness is another benefit of yoga that’s often overlooked. Setting your intentions or goals is an important footprint to your success. Some programs require close attention to guidelines to ensure health. Bringing awareness to your life choices, yoga encourages and reminds you to match your actions to your goals.

## How to Start Your Yoga Practice

The best way to start a yoga practice is to sprinkle yoga into your daily life. Little pieces of yoga throughout the day will bring you huge benefits with ease — Deep Belly Breathing at a red light or during commercials while watching TV; standing in Mountain pose (see sidebar) while your coffee brews or the microwave is cooking; or gentle seated twists (see sidebar) in front of the computer while it starts or when you find yourself on hold. Taking any movement you have and holding it a little longer, reaching a little farther, will all be beneficial even if you’re confined to a bed.

When you decide it’s time to find a yoga teacher, location is still the first question to answer. You are more likely to be consistent if the class is convenient to your home or workplace. Call or contact the teacher by email to have a chance to talk about what you want and if they have a class that will fit your needs. Remember, you are the customer. Coming early to class will enable you to find a spot that supports your comfort zone. Some of us like to be in the back or close to a wall. Others want to be up front so we can see everything that’s going on.



# Yoga for Everyone!

## 3-Part Deep Belly Breath

This can be done anywhere and in any position — seated, standing or even lying down. Breathing through your nose, soften your diaphragm. Inhale deeply expanding your lungs from bottom, middle to top. On the exhale, release from top, middle to bottom. Go slow. Enjoy the expansion of your lung capacity while you improve your cardiovascular exchange. Great for stress reduction — I especially like to do this while waiting in the doctor’s office.

## Simple Seated Twist

Sit so you’re not touching the back of your chair with your feet comfortably apart planted to the floor. On an exhale, reach across your body with your right hand to left knee or leg. The left hand goes back and can be supported on the seat or the back of the chair. Keep the energy of the hips grounded as you feel the twist deepen from hip to top of the head. Your eyes should look left in the direction of the twist. Breathe in shallow breaths that don’t interfere with the squeeze. Keep your belly relaxed. Hold this twist with the spine tall, even though it’s in rotation. Coming out, inhale back to center and twist to the other side. Twists are great to stimulate and cleanse all the organs and soft tissues of the torso.

## Standing Mountain Pose

Stand with your feet at true hip-width apart. We often believe our hips are farther apart than they really are. Reach in from the front and find your hipbones. Place your feet directly below your new found hips — it’s okay if your thighs squeeze! The important thing is to honor the alignment of your frame, not the flesh. Set your feet so the outside edges are parallel. This will make you feel a little pigeon-toed, causing your knees to be soft. (Never stand with locked knees.) Engage both your abdominal and gluteal core. A gentle press of the shoulder blades will open your heart center and give you a feeling of lightness. You can stand like this anywhere and no one will even know you’re practicing yoga.

To add arm work, on an inhale, lift the arms out to the sides and up overhead framing the head at the ears, palms facing not touching. Hold and feel the energy from your feet to your fingertips. On an exhale, release the arms down and soften the whole body as you release the pose.

If that first location isn't for you, keep trying. Know that the right teacher and the right class are out there for you. Don't suffer or spend your money on a class that isn't working for you, but don't give up either.

Once you've found a class, give yourself permission not to do every pose that's being taught. Listen for what the foundation movement is, as well as the benefit. From that information, move in a way that makes sense to your body. Go inward and remember — there's never any pain in yoga.

***About the Author:***

*Abby Lentz is founder of HeavyWeight Yoga®, yoga designed for people who are affected by excess weight or obesity. Her mission is to change the image of yoga to include people of all sizes. She was chosen by Fitness Magazine as one of their Fit 50 and her DVDs appear on More Magazine's Best Work DVD Dozen and their Best Yoga DVDs lists. She lives in Austin, TX and teaches yoga throughout the country. You can also find her leading a group yoga class at the OAC National Convention in Dallas. You can reach her at [abby@heartfeltyoga.com](mailto:abby@heartfeltyoga.com).*



*Photo courtesy of Abby Lentz*

## My 3 A's

Yoga can bring to you what I call the Three A's: Awareness, Acceptance and Affection. As you build your yoga practice, you'll find yourself aware of your body in a new way. Your body's edges will become clearer. Your everyday movements will deepen.

From awareness, you'll begin to notice how different your body is day-to-day, and so begin to accept those differences — especially the ones you can never change.

Finally, it is my deepest wish that you will come to love your body just as it is in the moment. Please remember, permanent changes come from love, not from hate — and you deserve to be loved now and always.





# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

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