

# Stressbuster Yoga for runners

In the third part of our series on running and stress, we look at how practising yoga can benefit your mind, your body and your running

Words Emma Heald

Running offers us many benefits. Of course there's the physical side of things. But way above that, it offers us an opportunity to step away from our lives and the daily to-do list. It's mindfulness, basically – and we can give ourselves a pat on the back for discovering it long before it became the in thing. So with that in mind, what on earth can yoga offer us that we don't already have? Quite a lot, actually.

During a run the body focuses on certain muscle groups such as hamstrings, hip flexors, calves and quads, while you also concentrate on the action of moving your arms and staying focused in order to complete the miles and avoid trip hazards. So there's quite a lot going on.

Traditional pre- and post-run stretches usually target the muscles that feel like they have been worked. However, yoga not only creates stability and strength on the 'worked' muscles but also gives your entire physique time to rest and restore itself with stretches for the whole of the body. Because yoga is an activity that intends to create balance, it means tightness and tension can be alleviated before a run, therefore prepping the body for more taxing training and reducing the likelihood of injuries.

## The benefits of yoga

Think of the body like a ball of elastic bands. When we wake up or get up from eight hours sitting at a desk, the rubber ball of bands is tight, knotted and firm. When your body runs it creates further tension through the dynamic action, and also sometimes because of poor technique or long distances. So the rubber ball gets tighter. And then we do it all again the next day.

Yoga gives the body the opportunity to lengthen muscles. It stabilises the joints of the body and can enable full rest post-run or create strength on rest days, therefore becoming a tool to both monitor and manage stress in the body. Physically it creates both balance and stability.

However, yoga is not solely a body-based practice. It is often the mind that wins the race, ensuring we go that extra

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step just when we need it most. So how can yoga improve our running and mentality alongside it?

The yoga toolbox includes meditation, visualisation techniques and mantras, all of which can improve your performance and endurance.

## Meditation, visualisation and mantras

Ever have those times when you know you will feel better after you've been for a run, but you just can't get out the door? The practice of meditation and mantra can help with this. A mantra is basically just setting an intention – but it has to be meaningful. Considering what your running or resting mantra can be is an excellent way to stay focused and is also a great way to stay resting when needed.

Paula Radcliffe's childhood running coach used to say, "Aim for the moon because if you miss, you will land on the stars." It became her mantra as she became the greatest female marathon runner of all time. Taking a few minutes to sit and create your own mantra can give you the motivation to run and enable you to ride the stress and mental challenges of a race. This could be as simple as, "I can do this", or something more personal, like Paula's. Google 'running mantras' for ideas.

## Concentrate on breathing

A yoga class often consists of pranayama, meaning 'life force' (pran) and 'extension or expansion' (ayama). Pranayama within the world of running can be used to induce the parasympathetic nervous system enabling the body to relax, whether that be pre-race/run or when creating time to let the body rest. Building in a mantra alongside the breath is an excellent way to focus the mind, quieten the mental chatter and bring health and vitality to the physical body.

### Try this exercise for alternate nostril breathing at home:

- 1. Sit in a comfortable position.
- 2. Block your right nostril by pressing the side of your nose gently, and inhale slowly through the left.

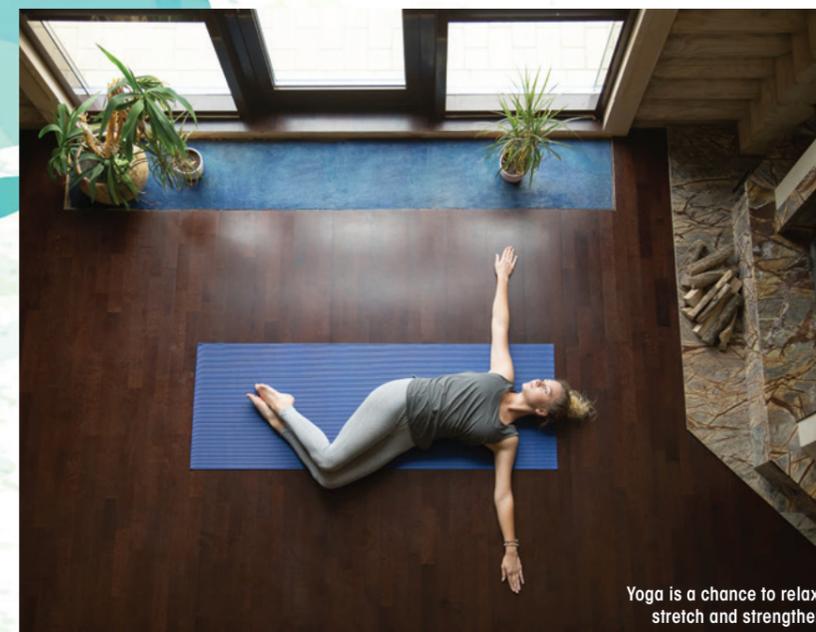


Try the alternate nostril breathing exercise

- 3. Hold your breath for a few counts, block your left nostril and then exhale slowly through the right nostril.
- 4. Keep the left nostril blocked, and inhale slowly through the right.
- 5. Hold your breath for a few counts, and then exhale through the left. Repeat the entire cycle for a couple of minutes and then extend the practice as you begin to feel more comfortable with it.

## Yoga for rest days

Yoga gives the body the opportunity to rest, the heart rate to settle and it



Yoga is a chance to relax, stretch and strengthen

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reduces the stressors on the system. Dependent on the class, yoga can be more dynamic or more gentle – whichever approach you prefer, it is very likely to prove beneficial for both your running and non-running life.

With the right approach, yoga gives us the opportunity for rest and importantly for the runner, a good stretch. A consistent yoga practice alongside a consistent running routine will reward you with flexibility, patience and a focused mind.

Imagine starting your next race in a calm, serene state, your body full of energy and genuinely relaxed. And then, just imagine feeling calm, breathing well and getting through the most challenging part of that race using your own personal mantra.

This, for many of us, is when the practice of yoga really comes into its own. Free your limbs, build your strength and your confidence with a little bit of sun worship right now! **//**



Investing time in a stretch session on your rest days benefits both the body and mind. The following poses can be done without any equipment. Think of them as an investment in your future health and all the running you wish to do.

### Legs up the wall or table

Elevating the legs is highly beneficial, enabling the mind and body to relax, and relieving stress and tension. It's also great for slowing the heart rate and cooling the body on a hot day.

**How to do this:** Scoot yourself towards a wall, sit sideways and then spin round and put your legs up it. Super tight hamstrings? Go a little further away from the wall. Stretch for at least five minutes like this.

### Low lunge

Lunges stretch your hip flexors and also strengthen hamstrings and quads. Keeping the hands on the floor by the front foot supports you as you deepen into this shape.

**How to do this:** Kneel on the floor. Step one foot forward and untuck the toes on the back foot. Gently press into the front hip flexor without straining the body. If it aggravates the knee or is uncomfortable pop a towel under it for support. By reversing the lunge you can move towards the hamstrings and the back. Stay in the above low-lunge shape, tuck the toes and reverse back, drawing the toes of the front foot towards you. Have the hands on the floor or use a wall for balance. Think of the hamstrings here as strong rather than tight.

### Reclining leg stretch using a strap/belt

Allowing the body to lie down after a run gives it time to recover and get grounded before heading off to a busy day. Try to cultivate a soft approach and avoid straining and don't worry about the leg being straight. This pose allows the mind to calm and the body to rest while also elevating and stretching the legs.

**How to do this:** Lie on the floor and loop a belt/scarf/towel around the ball of one foot then stretch it upwards. Extend the other leg or have it bent with the sole of the foot on the floor. Draw the chin in; if needed place a cushion under the back of the head. You can also bend and stretch the leg here, with an inhale and then an exhale, if holding a more static shape is too much.

### Toes pose

Our beautiful feet take a hammering when we are out running, creating tightness and tension in the feet. This is a 'try not to grit your teeth' shape and one to truly focus the breathing on. Consider it also as a preventative measure for conditions such as plantar fasciitis.

**How to do this:** Kneel on the floor. Tuck your toes under your feet, so that the top part of the balls of your feet are on the ground – try to include all the toes. Start with the hands on the floor and then see how it feels to sit back onto your heels. Hold for around 30 seconds to one minute and if you can, repeat three times. Place a blanket under the knees if needed.

### Reclining spinal twist

A relaxed running form can easily go out of the window when the body is under stress. Twists are wonderful yoga shapes to work with stress or anxiety. The action of twisting the spine and upper body can have a positive effect on your mental state.

**How to do this:** Lie on the floor and bring both knees into the chest. Allow the knees to move towards the ground and stretch out the arms. Take about 5-10 breaths here then switch to the other side. Tight shoulders? Roll up a towel and support the shoulder and/or knees. 🧘

### MORE INFORMATION

[nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/guide-to-yoga/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/guide-to-yoga/)