

Some Like It Hot: Is Hot Yoga Good for You?

By Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT



Q: Is that hot Yoga good for you? I can just sit in my car and sweat. What are the differences and safety concerns for my health?

A: Isn't it amazing how many "flavors" of Yoga there are? The wide variety of names and types can be a bit daunting. One of the major sub-categories in Yoga is the "hot" group where classes are held in a heated room. Let's take a look at what the rationale is, who it is appropriate for, and most importantly, the safety concerns and subtle health issues involved in choosing a hot practice.

What is Hot Yoga?

Typically it is any Yoga done in a hot room...from 90 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit. In the westernization of Yoga there are multiple branding efforts to get marketing traction. The most famous is the Bikram brand. The idea is that Yoga is a process of change and the "fire" (tapas) of practice burns away the dross or tired barriers to change. Often the precious metal analogy of gold and silver is used. Raise the heat, let the unneeded or unwanted melt or float to the surface and keep the good stuff! Another aspect of the heat is that it mimics the ambient conditions of parts of India where the practices developed and therefore heat is staying to true to the heritage. Valid points, but keep in mind there are other considerations to weigh in making a decision if it's right for you.

When Hot Yoga is Appropriate

Hot Yoga can be a wonderful practice if the following conditions are met:

- You are healthy, fit and have been training in a heated environment (acclimatized).
- There is a program of basic instruction where a teacher moves around the room giving specific, detailed feedback regarding alignment, balance and precautions for each asana.
- Props and other supports are available and you are encouraged to use them if you can't move fully into a posture.
- You are allowed to drink water during the practice (I know, but some won't let you).
- Quality of form is emphasized over depth of movement toward some "right" posture to attain.
- Rest and recovery is part of the practice with the teacher closely monitoring the student's responses and erring toward rest vs pushing for more.
- A health history is obtained and reviewed before you start.

When is Hot Yoga NOT Appropriate?

When one or more of those conditions are not met or ignored. Here's why:

- **You aren't healthy, fit and acclimatized:** The postures of Yoga place unique demands on both your joints and your cardiovascular system. The structural demands and load on the heart of a hot practice put you at risk for injury or worse if you ignore this point. There are very real cardiac risks to exercising in a heated environment: know them!
- **There is specific, detailed feedback:** Yoga demands a precision of alignment to protect your joints and spine, but also to stabilize the mind. Failure to get accurate feedback raises your risk at best missing the benefits of Yoga and at worst, hurting yourself going too fast, too deep or becoming too tired. Only a great teacher moving through the room can provide proper instruction.

• **Props and other supports are available:** These tools allow novices and tight students to benefit from Yoga while reducing the dangers in the last point. In Yoga, non-violence is the first and overriding rule. Studios that don't provide them or discourage their use are violating that principle and risking your health.

• **You can drink water:** see the last point, but it's true at some studios.

• **Quality of form over depth of movement:** Heat and fatigue change your tissue making it easier for you to move further than you ever have and it feels good. But, if you go too far you can overstretch and miss the tissue that needs to change or harm a joint without proper neuromuscular education of how to "get there" and "get back" = quality of movement.

• **Rest and recovery:** Our culture runs in exhausted mode, do you really need to get more exhausted? You also need to pause to let your brain assimilate the new data and bodyform as you change in your practice. Rest isn't wimpy. It is critical and smart.

• **Health history before you start:** Should be obvious from above. What you will discover is most don't, but they do have you sign a waiver of liability absolving them of all responsibility for your health. Hello? Are you nuts? If they don't care enough to know you, take your health elsewhere.

So as the temperatures climb this summer, if you are considering a hot Yoga practice, take care of yourself and be smart. If we can help you develop a safe, appropriate Yoga practice, please call 480-699-4867 or visit www.drofyoga.com to learn how you can do what will make you healthier.



Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT is a physical therapist and international leader in Yoga therapy. Dr Taylor lives in Scottsdale where he and his wife have a yoga-based rehabilitation clinic. He has authored numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and textbooks on yoga therapy. He served on the board of directors of the International Association of Yoga Therapist, teaches nationally, and maintains a busy private yoga therapy caseload. For more information see www.drofyoga.com or email info@yogatherapy.com.

Call 480-699-4867 for a consultation.