

Chapter 1

Introducing Yoga with Weights

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring yoga and yoga with weights
- ▶ Looking at the potential health benefits of yoga with weights
- ▶ Deciding whether you're ready to start doing yoga-with-weights workouts
- ▶ Investing in the appropriate tools, equipment, and gear
- ▶ Aligning your body properly for the exercises
- ▶ Reviewing safety issues and pain management

“What is yoga with weights, anyway?” Wonder no more, dear reader. This chapter familiarizes you with this exciting new exercise discipline: what it is, what you can get out of it, and what you need to get started (don't worry, you don't need much).

We believe that everyone can benefit from yoga-with-weights exercises. No matter how flexible you are, how old or young you are, whether you're a paragon of good health or you're just starting down the road to a healthier, happier lifestyle, yoga with weights can help you. We really want to encourage you to take up yoga with weights. We think, no, we *know* you'll love it!

In the Beginning, There Was Yoga . . .

Long before people started working out to dance videos or even doing calisthenics, there was *yoga* — a system of personal development and spiritual practice that began in India at least 5,000 years ago.

You thought yoga was an exercise program, didn't you? If so, you're right. You can get enormous health benefits from yoga exercises, called poses or postures, without going into the spiritual side of yoga.

The eight limbs of yoga

To work toward the goal of self-realization, yoga practitioners study the following eight limbs of yoga and integrate them into their lives:

- ✔ **Yama:** The code of ethics by which practitioners measure and monitor their behavior. Practitioners refrain from injuring others, lying, stealing, being greedy, and engaging in sensual activities.
- ✔ **Niyamas:** The observances by which practitioners control their mental energy and develop willpower. The observances are defined as purification, contentment, austerity, sacred study, and attunement to the absolute.
- ✔ **Asanas:** The poses, or exercises, that constitute the physical aspect of yoga. The exercises help develop the mind-body relationship and build physical strength, flexibility, and balance.
- ✔ **Pranayama:** The science of Prana (the life force) and its correlation to breathing. By controlling their breathing, practitioners discover how to control their thought processes.
- ✔ **Pratyahara:** A series of breathing exercises and techniques by which practitioners separate consciousness from sensual perception. The goal is to withdraw the conscious mind from the bondage of the physical body and its instinctual drives.
- ✔ **Dharana:** A series of breathing techniques and exercises, including mantra, designed to develop endurance through conscious effort and the power of concentration.
- ✔ **Dhyana:** A series of breathing techniques and exercises designed to help practitioners reach an effortless state of meditation.
- ✔ **Samadhi:** Advanced breathing exercises and techniques designed to return the individual consciousness to perfect divine unity.

But yoga is more than an exercise program. Yoga means “union” or “to integrate” in *Sanskrit* (the language of yoga). Yoga addresses the whole person, cultivating the mind, the body, and the spiritual potential that you have inside. Classic yoga practitioners seek to be integrated with universal consciousness. They believe that life is a process of purposeful evolution toward a state of self-realization. To achieve this state, they study and live the eight limbs of yoga, or the eightfold path (see the upcoming sidebar for more on this topic). Meditation is one of the vital limbs in this system. The exercise side of yoga emerged about 600 years ago to prepare yoga practitioners for meditation. Sitting for hours in yoga meditation is common, and to make themselves strong enough and supple enough to sit in meditation for long periods of time, yoga practitioners developed yoga poses, or *asanas* in Sanskrit. The poses are only one part of a much larger personal development system that over time becomes a rich lifestyle, but in the Western part of the world, most people think of exercises when they hear the word “yoga.”

Yoga schools at a glance

No yoga school is better than another; which one you choose to study is simply a matter of personal preference. More important than any yoga school is the student-teacher relationship.

The differences between schools usually have to do with emphasis. For example, some schools place more emphasis on the alignment of the body, the coordination of breath and movement, holding postures, or the transition from one posture to another.

Roughly speaking, here are the different yoga schools:

- ✔ **Ananda:** Developed by Swami Kriyananda, a direct disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda. The emphasis is on self-realization.
- ✔ **Anusara:** As taught by John Friend, this school focuses on flowing with grace and is based on principles and spirals of alignment.
- ✔ **Ashtanga:** Developed by K. Pattabhi Jois, this yoga gives you a serious athletic workout.
- ✔ **Baptiste Method of Yoga:** Developed by Magaña and Walt Baptiste, this school is based on Raja yoga; the focus is on mind and meditation.
- ✔ **Baptiste Power of Yoga:** Developed by Sherri Baptiste, this school brings together flowing postures, breathing techniques, and yoga philosophy.
- ✔ **Bikram:** Developed by Bikram Choudhury, this school presents a series of 26 static-holding postures practiced in a room heated to 110° Fahrenheit.
- ✔ **Himalayan Institute:** Developed by Swami Rama from a lineage of sages of the ancient cave monasteries of the Himalayas, the focus is on meditation.
- ✔ **Integral:** Swami Satchidananda's Integral yoga is a major component of Dr. Dean Ornish's groundbreaking work on reversing heart disease.
- ✔ **Iyengar:** Developed by B.K.S. Iyengar, this school emphasizes attention to detail and the precise alignment of postures.
- ✔ **Kripalu:** This school puts great emphasis on proper breathing, alignment, and the coordination of breath and movement.
- ✔ **Kundalini:** Developed by Yogi Bhajan, this school emphasizes classic poses, breathing, the coordination of breath and movement, and meditation.
- ✔ **Paramahansa Yogananda:** This is the Kriya yoga self-realization fellowship; the emphasis is on the spiritual and on meditation.
- ✔ **Power Vinyasa Yoga:** Developed by Baron Baptiste, this is a sweat-based, synchronized, dynamic-flow yoga practiced in a room heated to 85–90°F.
- ✔ **Power Yoga:** This school is based on the Ashtanga repetitive series of postures.
- ✔ **Sivananda:** This school follows a set structure that includes pranayama, classic asanas, and relaxation.
- ✔ **Viniyoga:** Developed by Sri T. Krishnamacharya and carried on by his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, this school is a methodology for developing practices for individual conditions and purposes.
- ✔ **Vivekananda:** This school offers a spiritual brand of yoga.

12 Part I: Getting Started

From a practical point of view, part of the appeal of yoga comes from the stress reduction that occurs while practicing the postures and concentrating on the breathing, which we discuss in detail in Chapter 4. Practice yoga long enough and you'll discover that yoga is a personal journey as well; you notice an overall sense of well-being and peace of mind. Yoga can help you relax, feel more grounded, and experience more joy in your life. For that reason, it benefits not only your mental and physical health, but also the quality of your work and daily life.

In this book, we focus mostly on the physical aspects of yoga with weights. We want you to know that the techniques, exercises, and practices you experience in this system aren't watered down; they're the real deal for body, mind, and spirit. If you're interested in discovering more about the philosophical and spiritual aspects of yoga, we recommend *Yoga For Dummies*, by Georg Feuerstein and Larry Payne (Wiley).

As a spiritual practice and exercise program, yoga continues to evolve, with new schools of yoga and new exercise variations prospering every day. Enter yoga with weights!

... And Now There's Yoga with Weights

Yoga with weights is a hybrid of two powerful, time-tested exercise systems: yoga and bodybuilding. Working out with weights is one of the best ways to achieve overall physical fitness, and yoga is renowned as a system of personal development by which you can cultivate peak performance and achieve a higher quality of life. By combining these exercise systems, yoga with weights addresses the needs of your body, but it also goes beyond the physical dimension of your well-being.

Yoga with weights calls for 1-, 3-, or 5-pounds weights on your wrists and/or ankles. The weights stabilize your body and help you achieve a higher level of physical benefit and conditioning. Yoga with weights is a system for the body, mind, and spirit. If you practice diligently, it can be a way of being and living through conscious exercise that leads you to discover your true self.

The addition of the weights makes you feel the effect of the yoga training sooner. The weights train your muscles where to be and where to go. In a beginning yoga practice, several months could go by before you start to "get it." You have to figure out how and where to move different parts of your body. It doesn't take you as long to understand what yoga is about when you practice yoga with weights, because the weights help you move your body into the right positions. The weights force you to engage the right muscles. The added weight also offers a deeper sense of physical grounding, and the weights challenge your balancing skills more intensely than traditional yoga.

The Baptiste family's yoga journey

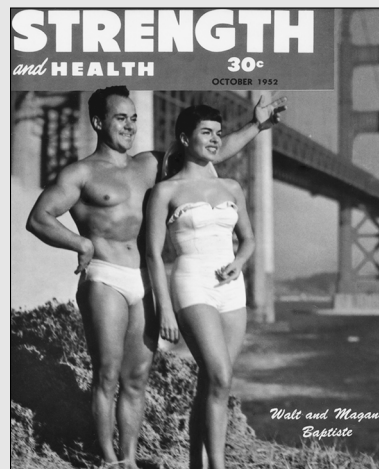
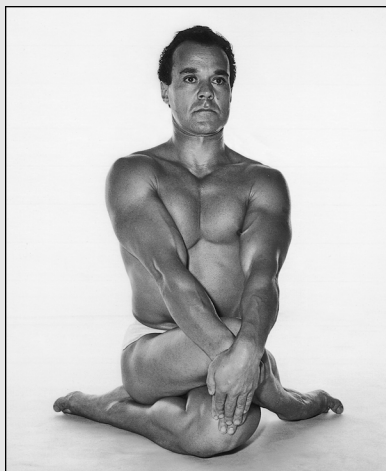
In his lifetime, Sherri's father, Walt Baptiste, had an interesting yoga journey, one that prefigures yoga with weights. Walt started as a bodybuilder and later incorporated yoga into his exercise program. Along with his wife (and Sherri's mother) Magaña, he opened the first yoga school in San Francisco in 1955. (Walt and Magaña are pictured here.)

Walt won the "Mr. America" bodybuilding title in 1949. He was the founder and editor of *Body Moderne* magazine, a publication for bodybuilders devoted to health and fitness. He was always experimenting with ways to improve his bodybuilding techniques, and his experiments eventually led him to breathing and mindfulness techniques. Rather than grunting, groaning, and straining in his bodybuilding workouts, Walt discovered how to apply the principals of concentration and breath, as practiced today in yoga with weights.

Yoga was considered an extremely exotic practice when Walt and Magaña started teaching classes in the 1950s. Standing on your head,

contemplation, meditation, and contorting yourself seemed too foreign and too strange. For fear of being embarrassed, some of the students who came to the Baptiste's Yoga Philosophic Health Center in the 1950s asked the couple not to tell their spouses that they were taking these weird "yogurt" classes.

Walt understood that yoga was more than a mere exercise program; he knew that it had the power to transform people's lives and empower individuals in ways that working out simply couldn't. And Walt was right. Now you can see yoga studios and people walking along with rolled-up yoga mats in every major American city. By some estimates, 20 million Americans are taking the yoga journey. Three-quarters of all health clubs offer yoga classes. The yoga-client list includes professional athletes, celebrities, and health professionals. The current yoga boom is no surprise; its popularity and staying power are testaments to its value as an exercise program that addresses the body, mind, and soul.



14 Part I: Getting Started

Weighing the Benefits of Yoga with Weights

Before you take the plunge and give yoga with weights a try, you may be interested in knowing what the many health benefits of yoga with weights are. Here's a catalog of health benefits you may experience if you devote yourself to yoga with weights.

Making you stronger

Yoga makes you stronger and tones your muscles, but by adding the weights, you give additional boost to the muscle strengthening and toning powers of yoga.

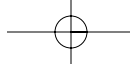
When you stress a muscle with exercise or a repeated activity, the muscle increases in strength and diameter as the muscle fiber expands. In other words, the muscle is toned. The weight-bearing aspect of yoga with weights improves the oxygenation of muscles, which promotes the muscles' growth and repair. The stretching improves the flexibility and health of muscles and tendons. Yoga with weights also reduces the risk of muscle tears and strains because weightlifting, when properly done, integrates the muscles closer to the bones.

Building your core strength

You read a lot about your "core" and "core strength" in this book. When we write about your core, we're referring to the muscles of your trunk and torso that support your spine. These muscles are the major players in balancing and coordination. The core muscles also support your shoulders and hips. Most people don't know it, but the abdominal muscles, which are also core muscles, are very important for supporting your spine.

Unless your core muscles are strong, you can't develop the muscles of your arms and legs to their fullest potential, in much the same way that tree branches can't grow big unless the trunk of the tree is strong enough to support the branches.

Your core muscles are responsible for good posture. They keep your back straight and your shoulders square, and they keep you from slouching. Your core muscles also support and protect your internal organs. For example, if



the muscles around your back and abdomen aren't strong, sitting up straight for long periods of time is hard, because the muscles of your back and abdomen take some of the weight-bearing stress off the smaller muscles in your head, neck, and even your shoulders. Without strong core muscles, you're more susceptible to back problems.



When most people think of getting stronger, they imagine being able to lift heavier weights or run faster. But before you can accomplish such feats, you need to develop the core muscles of your trunk and torso. Deep strength begins in these core muscles — your power source, the axis around which so many muscles move. Yoga with weights is a superb program for reaching into the center of your body to engage, utilize, and exercise the core muscles that really matter.

Toning your muscles

Yoga-with-weights exercises are designed to work and tone all the muscles of your body. If you think your arms are too flabby, if you want to develop your abdominal muscles, or if you want to strengthen your legs, you can find many yoga-with-weights exercises that target those areas. In traditional yoga, you can tone and refine parts of your body with exercises. The addition of weights makes it possible to really dig into a muscle or muscle group and work it hard. Chapter 15 describes exercises that target different body areas.

Being more beautiful

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course. But beauty is also a matter of confidence, poise, and bearing. We've seen older people with wrinkles and thinning silver hair who don't fit the standard definition of beauty but who are nevertheless very beautiful. These people radiate an inner glow that has ripened during the years. They have a light in their eyes that tells you that they're very much alive to the world around them and living their lives in a way that's full of enthusiasm. They have what's sometimes called inner beauty or an inspired state of being.

It's often said that yoga slows the aging process. What yoga really does is to help maintain and improve your posture and general health through exercising and proper breathing. Yoga with weights helps to increase your vitality and overall well-being so you look and feel younger and more beautiful. It can give you self-confidence and poise, increase your self-awareness, and make the light inside you shine more brightly with each decade.

16 Part I: Getting Started

Addressing your flexibility and range of motion

Yoga is well known for making people more flexible, supple, lithe, and limber. You've probably seen photographs of human pretzels, like the one in Figure 1-1, contorting themselves into different yoga postures. Being flexible is necessary if you want to be comfortable in your body. Think of all the practical advantages of being flexible. You can reach higher, sit more comfortably on the floor, sit at your desk for longer periods of time with greater ease, or stand longer. You have the choice of bending at the waist or squatting when you want to pick up something from the floor.

Soreness, swelling, and pain relate to the loss of body tissue movement. To prevent injury and postural changes, it helps if your joints have a maximum range of motion.



Many people believe that being flexible enough to get into pretzel poses is the primary goal of yoga. Being flexible does show up over time as a natural part of the process, but it's a secondary goal. You can be a good yoga practitioner without being especially flexible. Yoga with weights combines basic master techniques from the yoga tradition with physical culture practices. The goal is to achieve the proper body alignment and breathe correctly in every move and exercise while cultivating an open mind and heart. You want to achieve a balanced and overall strengthening effect, not to be as flexible as a pretzel.

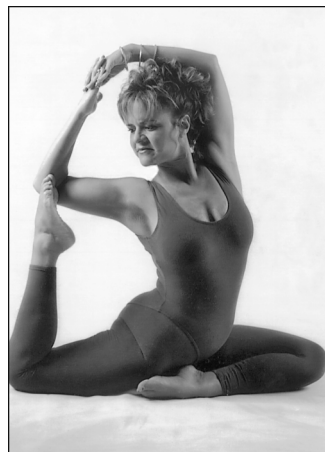


Figure 1-1:
Author
Sherri
Baptiste in a
yoga pretzel
pose.



Indian club, anyone?

If you think yoga with weights is new under the sun, think again. As an exercise discipline, combining yogalike postures with weights is many centuries old, except that the ancient practitioners didn't lift weights as we know them. They lifted heavy wooden clubs called *gadas*, or *Indian clubs*. After the British colonized India, they recognized the value of exercising with Indian clubs, and swinging Indian clubs became an exercise activity in Britain and then in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In some respects, yoga with weights is a return to an exercise program that was practiced in India for centuries and was well known to American and British exercise enthusiasts 100 years ago.

Indian clubs are shaped like bowling pins. They range in height from 2 to 2½ feet and weigh between 1 and 7 pounds. If you could time-travel to an American gymnasium in 1910, you'd see an assortment of Indian clubs painted with

colorful designs lined up against the wall. The clubs have since become collector's items. Look up "Indian clubs" next time you visit eBay (www.ebay.com), the online auction house. You'll see some beautiful examples.

Physical trainers liked the clubs because they permitted you to build muscle strength while maintaining the range of motion in your arms and shoulders. Exercising with Indian clubs was sometimes called *circular weight training*. In traditional weight training, sometimes called *linear weight training*, you isolate one muscle or one muscle group as you lift. This isolation can make you stiff or muscle-bound after you train for a while. But by swinging Indian clubs, you can build strength while retaining your grace of motion.

Yoga with weights and circular weight training share some common traits. Both work your muscles, and both help your muscles retain their agility, flexibility, and range of motion.

Improving your circulation

Whenever you exercise, you improve your blood circulation. After you stretch or contract a muscle in a yoga-with-weights exercise and the muscle relaxes, it becomes flooded with blood! Flooded with blood may sound like the title of a horror movie, but this blood inundation is good for you because it increases the flow of blood to your muscles, and blood delivers nutrients. Your muscles become stronger and healthier because they receive more nutrients. Stretching also helps renew muscles and muscle fiber.

Creating body awareness

Yoga with weights builds body awareness. You can think of yoga with weights as a dialogue between your mind and body. As you exercise, your brain sends a message to a part of your body telling it to move in a certain direction, and your body sends a signal back to your brain saying that the body part can make the desired motion or can't move any farther. When your brain receives its signal, it sends out another signal asking the part of the body to become

18 Part I: Getting Started

more active or relax a little more. This ongoing dialogue amounts to a self-exploration of your body. In a very profound way, it makes you more aware of your body and enables you to extend the physical limits that you thought your body was incapable of reaching.

For the past several years, Sherri has worked with an older man who had polio in his youth. Her experiences with this man have shown her just how beneficial yoga can be to body awareness. He can now bend over, sit up, and walk with more ease, confidence, and coordination. In general, his muscle strength, range of motion, and overall sense of well-being have improved. Through his commitment and practice, yoga has been supportive and helped him rewire some of what we call the nerve highways and pathways that polio had damaged.

Focusing on your balance and coordination

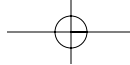
Most of the yoga-with-weights exercises in this book challenge your ability to balance and your coordination. Balancing is discovering how to work muscles in opposition to one another. When you balance on one leg, for example, you flex, or integrate, some muscles, and you relax others. If you flex or relax the wrong muscles, you lose your balance. Yoga with weights helps you understand which muscles to contract or relax in an action, and in so doing it teaches balance and coordination.

Balancing improves your ability to direct your thoughts or stream of concentration. You develop skills of concentration in order to balance. Balancing fires the neurons of your brain. It helps clear the nerve highways and pathways so you can focus better. Recent studies in brain elasticity indicate that exercises that develop coordination and balance stimulate the brain to create new maps and communication pathways, keeping the brain healthy and vital.

Building bone density

Loosely speaking, “bone density” refers to how strong and dense your bones are. To be specific, *bone density* is a measure of how tightly packed the cells and molecules in a bone are. The more tightly packed the tissue is, the higher the bone density, and the healthier the bone. Low bone density increases your risk of fracturing or breaking a bone.

As they age, most people lose bone density, partly because their bodies can't absorb the calcium and minerals they need for strong bones as readily as they once could. Bone density decreases gradually in men and women starting at age 30; in women, the decrease is more pronounced after menopause because estrogen, the ovarian hormone, plays a role in maintaining strong bones.



Weight-bearing exercises such as yoga with weights help bones retain density. When you lift a weight, your muscle pulls against your bones, which makes your bones experience stress. Detecting this stress, your body sends a signal to the cells in your bones that goes something like this: “Please get stronger and denser.” Isn’t it nice to know that some kinds of stress are actually good for your health?

Finding out the correct way to breathe

“But I know how to breathe,” we hear you say. Are you sure about that? Most people don’t realize that they aren’t breathing correctly. They don’t breathe with their abdomens, mid-diaphragm areas, or upper chest areas in a balanced way. Instead, they habitually take short, shallow breaths. When they exercise, some people even hold their breath without realizing it. Most people don’t always breathe fully into their lungs, and they miss out on the many wonderful benefits of proper breathing.

We devote an entire chapter to breathing — Chapter 4. Proper breathing can reduce stress and lower your blood pressure. It delivers life-giving oxygen to your body so you have the energy you need. Yoga and yoga with weights are two of a handful of exercise programs that concern themselves with breathing properly. Read Chapter 4 to understand what a deep breath really is.

Squeezing and soaking

Squeeze-and-soak exercises are exercises that massage your internal organs — your liver, stomach, intestines, pancreas, and others. We include many squeeze-and-soak exercises in this book because they help squeeze out the toxins in your internal organs and deliver more blood and oxygen to the organs.

When you bend forward or twist your spine, you squeeze and soak. When you return to a resting position, your organs open up and return to their normal shapes and sizes, and as they do so, they soak up oxygenated blood cells. This oxygenation restores and helps to maintain the organs’ health and vitality.

Developing the quality of self-awareness

This book mostly sticks to the physical side of yoga with weights, but that doesn’t mean we want to downplay the quality of consciousness and self-awareness that yoga practitioners develop when they commit themselves deeply and intensely to yoga. Yoga consciousness is real. Yoga encourages you to be more aware not only of your body, but also of the world around you.

20 Part I: Getting Started

The discipline helps you stay in the moment so you're more cognizant of sounds, sights, and other sensations. Yoga awakens you. It teaches you to live a life without blinders so you're more keenly in tune with the flow of life — the mysterious force that makes the world pulsate and grow.

We like to compare the yoga practice to the opening of a rose or other flower. The roots, foundation, and stem of the rose — the flower's physical body — must be strong enough to support it. Yoga-with-weights exercises strengthen your body. As the flower awakens, it blossoms and opens its petals to drink in the sunlight. Similarly, the meditation and breathwork that accompany the yoga-with-weights practice open your awareness to the outside world and your own potential to grow. Like the blossoming rose absorbing light from the sun, you commune and connect from within more completely with the world around you.

Evaluating Your Readiness

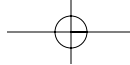
"Can I really do this?" is a question many people ask themselves everyday. But when they ask this question, they ought to remember that the only thing that gets in their way, most of the time, is themselves. They invent excuses *not* to try a new activity even if the activity is very good for them. Everybody is good at procrastinating. The discussion that follows is for people who can't quite decide whether yoga with weights is for them.

You haven't studied yoga

Should you have studied yoga already in order to study yoga with weights? The short answer is: It isn't necessary. Yoga with weights is user-friendly, meaning it isn't intimidating, and you don't need a background in yoga. The door is always open. Anyone who's interested is welcome.

Yogis sometimes say, "You're as young as your yoga practice." The saying refers to yoga's rejuvenating qualities and to the fact that practicing yoga is akin to being a newborn, in that you discover anew how to move your body when you practice yoga. Like a baby learning to lift his or her head or roll over, yoga students feel their way into new, more liberating body motions and positions as they practice yoga. Yoga is well known for making people look and feel younger. To some degree, yoga slows down the aging process. Bone mass develops, and you feel more vital and energetic.

Of course, if you've already studied yoga, studying yoga with weights is that much easier because the language and the concepts aren't completely new or unfamiliar. For example, you already understand the importance of breathing in exercise. If this book instructs you to breathe deep into your chest and lungs, you know what's what. And if this book tells you to move into the



downward-facing dog position, you know exactly what that is. A downward-facing dog? Don't all dogs face downward?

You haven't had weight training (or you lift weights on the regular)

You don't need to have lifted weights before now to study yoga with weights. The weights you use are only 1 to 5 pounds and aren't difficult to get the hang of. If you've never picked up a weight before, rest reassured that holding a pair of hand weights or strapping on a pair of ankle weights doesn't take any expertise whatsoever. The weights help you feel more grounded but don't weigh you down.

We've noticed that the yoga room intimidates people who have lifted weights. Why? Because weightlifters aren't flexible, and they're used to being some of the fittest, best athletes in the gym. Sherri can't count the number of times weight trainers and big-time bodybuilders have told her, "I really want to come to your yoga class." But only a handful of them showed up.

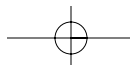
Stepping out of your element and comfort zone is a challenge for everybody, bodybuilders included, but taking that first step is actually much easier than you may think. The real beauty of yoga with weights for people who do lift weights regularly is that it benefits them in new and balanced ways, allowing them to reclaim full range of motion and flexibility while maintaining their strength. This is just what they often need.

One of the biggest attractions of yoga with weights is being able to lift weights and still maintain your flexibility. You get the same muscular tone you get from weight training and work on your flexibility as well. You won't get "bulked up" or muscle-bound, but your muscles will be toned, defined, and strengthened.

You're really out of shape

Out of shape? Who? You? Well, you're not the only one who's out of shape. Life just starts doing its thing with us and pretty soon we fall out of shape. We're sure you've been told before that staying in shape takes consistency and a life-long commitment. All you have to do is put in the effort and you soon reap the rewards.

If you're very out of shape, start slow. Go to Chapter 6 and start with the gentle walking and breathing exercises. Try to observe a daily walking program of 20 to 45 minutes to get the ball rolling. When you build your confidence, go to Chapter 7 and start doing the Balanced Workout. You may also want to check out Chapter 18, which offers low-impact exercises designed for seniors.



22 Part I: Getting Started



Busy moms, CEOs, and other dynamic people we know use this technique to find time to exercise: They schedule the time. Knowing how easy it is *not* to exercise, they enter their yoga classes on their calendars and plan their time around yoga. They make a commitment in writing to show up. The classes are on their calendars and they have to go no matter what. (Chapter 19 provides you with some tips for staying motivated to work out.)

You're stiff as a board

Some people are by nature muscle-bound or tight, and they have a limited range of motion. They can hardly lean forward far enough to tie their shoes.

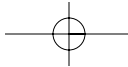
People with tight muscles tend to be protective and guarded in their movements. They don't have the confidence to move freely. This lack of confidence hinders their movements and makes them even stiffer. Eventually, they may develop bad posture, which can lead to other health problems, including chronic back pain and chronic headaches (see Chapter 14). Bad posture can compress the internal organs, causing poor digestion, high blood pressure, and respiratory ailments.

If you're stiff by nature, yoga with weights can seem like a risky enterprise mentally and emotionally when you begin exercising. But hang in there. Breath by breath, exercise by exercise, you can escape the cage that your body has become, spread your wings, and fly. As Chapter 4 explains, yoga breathing techniques can improve the blood circulation in your body and bring new healthy cells to your muscles. Where flexibility is concerned, success breeds success. One muscle unknitting can cause the one beside it to loosen. Even people who are very stiff by nature can become limber if they stick with yoga with weights and practice it as little as twice a week. Eventually, your muscles will rest back against your bones and stretch out and elongate, and you'll be able to move more comfortably and freely.

You're loose as a goose

Some people are double-jointed. Their tendons and ligaments are more elastic. They can touch their noses to their knees without any distress or bend over backwards to touch the floor. People who are double-jointed, or hyperflexible, run the risk of hyperextending their knees, elbows, and other joints because their ligaments and tendons are too elastic. They're capable of flexing well beyond a joint's normal range. Unless they develop the muscular strength to support their supple joints, these people can injure their joints in the course of doing an exercise.

Hyperflexibility is probably a matter of genetics. You're born with limbs that are too loose, but you can do something about it. Yoga with weights can



benefit people who suffer from hyperflexibility because it strengthens supporting muscles. This extra muscle mass makes the joints more stable.

You're pregnant or have a preexisting medical condition

A few medical conditions may preclude you from doing yoga with weights. If you have a heart condition, you're obese, or you're pregnant, think twice before undertaking this form of exercise and proceed with caution. You may have to consult your doctor before doing the exercises.



The cardinal rule of yoga applies especially to people with medical conditions: If something doesn't feel right, if an exercise makes you uncomfortable, or if you feel pain, don't do it. Back away from the exercise and consider whether you're doing it right or whether you should be doing it at all.

Heart conditions

Heart disease is caused by poor diet, lack of exercise, or a genetic predisposition. The most common heart ailment is *coronary artery disease*, which is caused by a clogging or narrowing of the arteries that restricts the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the heart. If the heart muscle is weakened and can't pump blood efficiently, *congestive heart failure* can result. Signs of a heart condition include angina (chest pain or discomfort that occurs when your heart muscle doesn't get enough blood), edema (swelling in the legs), and shortness of breath.



If you have a heart condition such as coronary artery disease, speak to your doctor before you undertake any kind of exercise. All forms of exercise, including yoga with weights, place a burden on your cardiovascular system because exercise increases the flow of blood and stresses the heart muscle. For that reason, you must be especially careful before you undertake an exercise program if you have a heart condition.

The good news for people who are cleared by their doctors to practice yoga with weights is that the discipline offers real rewards to patients with heart disease. Yoga with weights lowers your stress level and gives you the opportunity to exercise at your own pace without overtaxing your cardiovascular system.

Obesity

Being obese doesn't prevent you from doing yoga with weights, although you do have to start slowly. If the Balanced Workout exercises we describe in Chapter 7 are too difficult, start with the chair exercises we present in Chapter 18. You'll discover that after a few workouts, the core muscles in your trunk and torso will become stronger. The weight on your body will be distributed more evenly and you'll be able to move more freely.

24 Part I: Getting Started

Pregnancy

Before you take on yoga with weights or another new exercise program during a pregnancy, seek the advice of a prenatal care physician. Typically, women who have been cleared to exercise can do most of the standing and sitting exercises we describe in this book until the fifth or sixth month of pregnancy. After that period, depending on the woman and how strong she feels, doing exercises that require lying on your back or belly may be too strenuous or difficult.

In our experience, women who practiced yoga before they became pregnant can continue doing many of the standard yoga practices throughout their pregnancies, but women who want to take up the discipline to stay healthy during their pregnancies are better off in prenatal yoga classes. The trainers who oversee these classes know which exercises are suitable for pregnant women; they're attuned to a pregnant woman's health and understand how to guide her through yoga workouts. Chapter 17 has advice for pregnant women who want to study yoga with weights.

What You Need to Get Started

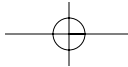
To get started with yoga with weights, you need a little willpower, an open mind, and a sense of adventure; at least those are the only intangibles you need. Taking the first step in any new activity is usually the hardest part. Go ahead and take the first step. You won't regret it.

As for the tangibles, you need some equipment to get going. You need a quiet and comfortable place to exercise, hand weights, and ankle weights. Chapter 2 explains all the equipment in more detail.

Mastering Posture Alignment Techniques

Posture alignment refers to how your muscles are integrated and bones are aligned to support your body for optimal movement during exercise. The aim of good posture alignment is to establish a solid foundation with your body so you can support your limbs, back, and head while you exercise. You want your body to be safe, secure, and able to expand more fully and freely during each exercise.

To avoid injury and to get more out of yoga-with-weights exercises, it pays to practice proper posture alignment. The posture-alignment techniques we present here give you a greater sense of stability and balance not only when you exercise, but also when you stand in lines or sit for long periods of time. The better your posture is, the fewer injuries you're prone to in exercise and in daily life.

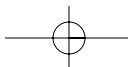


In the workout chapters in this book, we often give directions for maintaining a solid foundation. Here are the directions you come across in the exercise descriptions that deal with posture alignment:

- ✔ **Engage your core muscles.** Your core muscles are the muscles in your trunk and torso that are responsible for supporting your spine. When you engage these muscles, it feels as though you're wearing a tight-fitting spandex suit on your body because you have a "hugged-in" feeling. You feel empowered when you move from your core muscles into all the exercises.
- ✔ **Draw your belly in and up and your tailbone down.** As your tailbone drops toward the floor, your legs strengthen, and you press your leg muscles up against the bone where they can support your body. You should feel the muscles hugging the bones as the bones begin lengthening.
- ✔ **Press into all four corners of your feet.** You root downward through the soles of your feet to create depth and stability while you exercise. You should feel equal weight on the front and back of each foot as well as on the sides. Feel the corners of your heel and the ball or pad on the front of your foot — especially the area below your big toe and baby toes — pressing downward. You should also feel the arches of your feet gently lifting up as if energy from the front of your shins is pulling your arches up. The feeling continues through your knees as your thigh muscles gently lift your knees upward.
- ✔ **Stabilize and center your head between your shoulders.** We may ask you to perform this action during standing exercises. Gaze forward with your chin naturally down, not lifted or tilted. Draw your shoulders away from your ears and your shoulder blades down your back. Make sure your chest is comfortable, spread your collarbones wide, and give a slight lift to your breast bone or sternum, lifting naturally. Stand with your hips aligned over your knees and with your knees over your heels.
- ✔ **Spread your fingers wide.** When your hands are on the floor and you're supporting your body with your hands, we ask you to spread your fingers wide so that each finger is active and pressing firmly on the floor to help support your body.
- ✔ **Place your shoulders over your wrists and hands and your hips over your knees.** We give you this instruction when an exercise requires you to be on all fours. When you're in this position, make sure that you distribute your body weight evenly over your wrists, hands, and knees and that you fully engage the core muscles of your trunk.



When you're lifting a hand weight or an ankle weight, always make sure not to hurry. Lift the weight in a slow, controlled fashion. When you go slow, you make your body more stable and capable of supporting the weight, you isolate the muscle you want to work more effectively, and you don't cheat by relying on your momentum to lift the weight.



26 Part I: Getting Started

No matter what yoga-with-weights exercise you're doing, your entire body should be involved. In addition to keeping your core body engaged, before you do an exercise, direct your thoughts to the specific area that's most actively involved in that particular exercise. For example, if you're doing bicep curls, focus on your biceps. By directing your mind to the specific body action, you enhance your body-mind connection and create a more empowered workout. This technique is also excellent for mental conditioning.

Heeding the All-Important Safety Issues

Use common sense when practicing yoga with weights. If something doesn't feel right, don't do it. Work at your own level of ability and never push yourself too far. The following pages present guidelines for making sure you practice yoga with weights safely. These guidelines can help you determine what's safe, but practically speaking, it's up to you to draw your own guidelines. Yoga with weights is a voyage of self-discovery. After you practice the discipline long enough, you understand what your breathing, discomfort level, and pain level mean. The object of the exercises is to come to the edge without stepping off the cliff — to push yourself without pushing too far. As long as you stay in the moment and register the sensations in your body very carefully, your breathing, discomfort level, and pain level can tell you where the edge is and show you how to get the most from the exercises.

Listen to your breathing

Rapid breathing, short and shallow breathing, holding your breath, and gasping are signs of distress. If you can't take slow, deep, rhythmic breaths as you exercise, you're overexerting and subjecting yourself to injury. Ease away from what you're doing just enough to regain control over your breathing, and then continue with the exercise.



Yoga-with-weights exercising isn't about coming to the edge and falling off; it's about riding the crest of the wave in all its glory and enjoying the ride in the process. For more information on proper breathing techniques, see Chapter 4.

Be aware of your discomfort level

In yoga with weights, you make a distinction between comfortable discomfort and uncomfortable discomfort. Feeling comfortable discomfort, such as the uneasiness that accompanies breaking new ground in yoga with weights (or any other exercise technique), is fine. If you feel uncomfortable discomfort, however, you're straining yourself. Abandon the exercise you're doing and ask yourself whether you're doing the exercise correctly or pushing yourself too far.

Can children study yoga with weights?

Some parents are concerned that working with weights can stunt children's growth. This concern isn't unwarranted. Lifting heavy weights without using the proper technique can put too much stress on the growth plate — the area of growing tissue at the end of long bones — and retard bone growth. If your children lift weights, make sure that they use the proper technique and start with light weights before moving on to heavy ones.

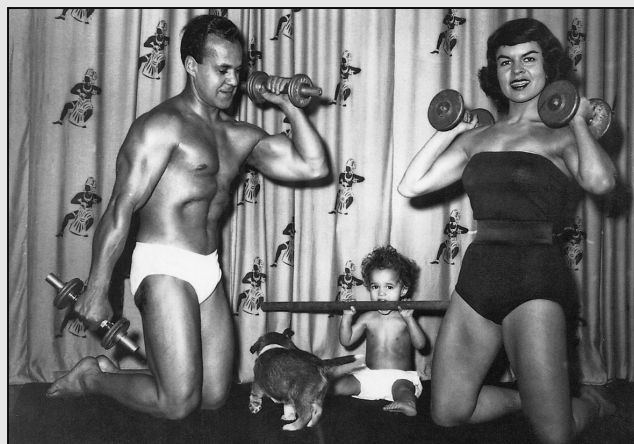
Bone growth, however, isn't an issue for children who practice yoga with weights. The 1-, 3-, or 5-pound weights are light and shouldn't damage growth plates in a child's bones. But if in doubt, have children do the exercises without weights or use the lightest weights. Give your children a lightweight wooden dowel or other item to help them figure out the exercises. They can still get a wonderful workout without the weights.

Getting children to practice yoga with weights isn't easy. Staying in one place is hard for them, and focusing on breathing isn't something they're accustomed to. Children prefer

fast-moving aerobic exercises to quiet, contemplative, inward-looking exercise techniques. Still, we encourage parents to get their children to try yoga with weights by making it fun, playful, and not too serious. Besides the physical benefits of discovering balance and coordination, children discover how to direct their minds and concentrate better. Kids who practice yoga with weights often do better in school. They know how to focus and concentrate on the activity before them.

To encourage children to practice yoga with weights, keep the workouts to 30 minutes or less. Try to make a game of the exercises. Children always exercise better in groups, and if you can get a group of kids to study yoga with weights, so much the better. We hope that the addition of weights to the yoga practice will make yoga more attractive to children.

The following photograph shows a young Sherri Baptiste working out with her parents, Walter and Magaña. As you can see, Sherri is lifting a weight. Weightlifting didn't stunt her growth, and she's now considerably taller than she is in this photograph.



28 Part I: Getting Started

Be aware of any pain you feel

As with other exercise techniques, you sometimes feel pain when you do yoga-with-weights exercises. Pay careful attention to any pain or discomfort you feel. Listen to it. Focus on the part of your body where the pain is located. Burning or stinging pain signals you to be careful, but not necessarily to back away from what you're doing. Sometimes you can control this kind of pain by breathing. Quivering or sharp pain means you've gone too far. You're pulling muscle off the bone and subjecting yourself to injury.

Practice at a slow but steady pace

When you're exercising, switching to automatic pilot and going through the motions is easy. When that happens, you increase your chances of injuring yourself, because you're not focusing on your body. Listen to your body and focus on what you feel as you exercise. This, along with conscious breathing and a steady exercise pace, helps prevent injuries. We carefully designed every exercise in this book to give you a workout but spare you the risk of injury. Timing and proper breathing are the keys to the depth and success of each workout and practice. Try not to speed up to get your workout over with quickly. By the same token, don't go so slow that you lose your pacing and rhythm and make the workout boring.