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## Why Do People Even Like Hot Yoga?

I set out to understand the allure of a sweat-drenched practice.



shameful, since it's my job to try new workouts. It's not that I don't like yoga—I really enjoy taking a Vinyasa flow or a power yoga class in my life and career, no matter how busy I am. But the reason I've avoided hot yoga thus far is because just thinking about exercising in a room that's heated to 100 degrees makes me sweaty and uncomfortable.



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Let's talk really quickly about what hot yoga actually means. “Hot usually means over 100 degrees. Heated is usually somewhere in the low to mid-90s,” [Jessica Matthews, M.S.](#), a yoga instructor, American Council on Exercise spokeswoman, and ACE-certified personal trainer and health coach, tells SELF. While hot yoga can be any kind of yoga, many people have heard of a type of hot yoga called Bikram, which is a specific set of yoga poses done in a heated room. “Though I see the terms interchanged often, typically when you say hot, you mean a Bikram or Bikram-like class. Heated is more like a power Vinyasa [class].”

Founder Bikram Choudhury [started Bikram yoga](#) in 1972 in San Francisco. Choudhury taught yoga in Japan and used space heaters to warm up the cold room. He believed that heat made it easier for students to stretch, and made them feel more euphoric after their practice—so he made it an integral part of the yoga school he started when he moved to the U.S. in the '70s. You can now find Bikram studios worldwide. In 2013, news broke that a former student had accused Choudhury of sexual harassment, discrimination, and defamation, according to [The New York Times](#). By 2016, [six more women](#) had filed lawsuits accusing him of sexual misconduct. He filed for bankruptcy in November 2017 after racking up \$16.7 million in legal judgments, [Reuters reported](#). Perhaps in response to the allegations, some Bikram studios have changed their names—but it's still the word people often use to refer to a type of hot yoga.

For the purpose of this article, you can assume that hot yoga refers to Bikram or Bikram-like yoga, where the room is heated to 100 degrees or more.

As someone who [avoids excessively heated scenarios](#) as often as possible in all areas of my life, I've had a really tough time understanding why people choose to exercise in 100-plus degrees. I don't get it—but I know there are reasons so many are dedicated to the sweaty, sticky practice. So I decided to talk to some experts to try to get the answer to my burning question—and also, to find out if this masochistic practice is even worth it.

**First, let's be clear: The supposed “detoxifying” and weight loss benefits of hot yoga are just myths.**

Plenty of people claim that hot yoga is detoxifying. I know a handful of twentysomethings who will go to hot yoga after a night of drinking because they say they want to “sweat out all the toxins.” Matthews says she also meets a lot of people who have been told this is a thing, that sweating more helps your body **detox** better or quicker.

Sadly, it really doesn't work that way. (If only.) “There just isn't an evidence base to support that,” Matthews says. Sweat's purpose is to prevent us from overheating; our kidneys and liver are what filter toxins so that we can excrete them through our urine and feces. Sweating in an extra hot yoga studio isn't going to make those organs work better. (And on that note, if you're hungover and **already dehydrated**, sweating a lot most likely won't make you feel so great.)

As for weight loss? “Sweat does not equal number of calories expended,” Matthews says. This is a misconception that goes far beyond just yoga, she adds. While you may lose a pound or so after hot yoga because you've sweat out water, once you rehydrate, you'll **gain it right back**.

## **A lot of people do find that hot yoga is a great stress reliever and a welcome mental and physical challenge.**

“Hot yoga is stress relief disguised as a workout,” Samantha Scupp, yoga instructor and founder of **Heatwise** yoga studio in Brooklyn, tells SELF. “An hour of deep sweat, moving to music in ways that feel good and release tension in your body, **stretching** everything out, and maximizing blood circulation—all of it puts you in a kind of trance. It's better than any drug.”

Some people also just like that it's hard, Matthews says. “One of the things I hear quite frequently [from students] is they like the physical and mental challenge. There's some **element of a challenge** that appeals to people, and that can be appealing for a lot of different workouts,” she says. I can relate to this. One of the main reasons I run half marathons is because it's a challenge, and there's something particularly satisfying about pushing through the discomfort and coming out on the other side. (I'm sure there are plenty of people who look at that and wonder why the hell I'm putting myself through it—actually, I know people wonder that because I've had friends legitimately ask.)

Being able to push through a tough hot yoga class can also help people feel more prepared to face the ups and downs of daily life, Scupp says. “Knowing you can breathe through the discomfort of a challenging pose while you're dripping sweat is something people carry with them throughout their day. The practice can manifest in all kinds of beneficial ways: breathing through the F train breaking down, negotiating your way through hoards of people in midtown on your way to work, or taking a moment to pause before you react to something.”

# One physical benefit experts tend to agree on is that hot yoga may be better at increasing flexibility than regular yoga.

It's true that it's best to **stretch your muscles** when they're warm. "We know that a warm muscle is more flexible and we have better flexibility benefits by stretching a warm muscle," exercise physiologist **Dustin Slivka**, Ph.D., C.S.C.S., associate professor in the School of Health and Kinesiology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, tells SELF. "That's why you should do a general warm-up before flexibility training. You're essentially doing that in hot yoga, since you're stretching in the heat."

Matthews notes that while the connection between heat and increased flexibility in hot yoga specifically has not been studied extensively (**research** does show flexibility benefits of practicing yoga in general), she confirms anecdotally that people find they can move deeper into poses in a hot or heated class.

She also cautions not to stretch past your limits. "Just be mindful in a heated environment that the muscles and tendons will be more pliable, so you have to also be more cognizant to not overexert, force, push, or prod yourself too deep into a posture."

## I was surprised to find that hot yoga is generally deemed pretty safe—as long as you're taking some precautions.

While the idea of working out in a very hot room sounds dangerous, experts suggest that hot yoga probably is low-risk for most people.

"The data that I've seen shows that the core body temperatures people are getting up to during hot yoga is not any more than what somebody would get up to **running** for 30 or 40 minutes on a treadmill in a gym," says Slivka, whose own research primarily focuses on the effects of exercise in extreme environments. "When we exercise intensely, we produce heat, and our bodies are pretty good at dealing with it," he adds. The difference with hot yoga is that the exercise is less intense and the heat is external. "The outcome tends to be the same in terms of overall temperature."

What could make it concerning is the humidity in the room. "Whenever you're working out in a hot and humid environment, we have huge concerns," Slivka says. The problem is that humidity in the air means there is less room for sweat to evaporate off your body—and that can cause you to overheat, no

matter how hydrated you are.

The best way to protect yourself is to listen to your body and use your best judgment. “Different people tolerate heat differently, and what may be fine for one person may not be for another,” Slivka says. “We as researchers don’t really know the exact factors [that determine] why some will develop heat illness while others won’t. There’s a lot of individual variation there.” If you feel hot and lightheaded, take a break and rest on your mat. If you don’t feel better quickly, you should probably stop, Slivka suggests. And also maybe leave the room so you can get some cool air (yes, I know yoga etiquette says to not get up and disrupt class, but just do it if you have to).

It’s also a good idea to start slowly and modify poses if you’re a beginner, so that you can let your body acclimate to the heat, says [Kelly Pritchett](#), Ph.D., R.D., registered sports dietitian and assistant professor in nutrition and exercise science at Central Washington University. This can help reduce the risk of overheating.

## **And just remember that when it comes to hydrating, more isn’t always more.**

Pritchett coauthored a [small study](#) of 21 participants that looked at fluid loss during Bikram yoga, which “found that the average fluid loss was only 1 percent of body mass, which is not a huge concern as ‘dehydrated’ is defined as a 2 percent bodyweight loss during exercise,” she says. “Most subjects did not drink very much either.”

Slivka’s suggestion about listening to your body rings true here, too. Drink when you feel thirsty, and don’t force yourself to chug water just because you think you should. This can lead to a condition called [hyponatremia](#), which can happen when you over hydrate to the point that your blood becomes diluted and your sodium concentration drops dangerously low. When it’s mild, you may not even realize you have it, but a severe case can cause symptoms that look a lot like [those of dehydration](#)—nausea, confusion, and irritability—and be fatal if it’s not treated quickly. This is rare in general, and much more common in endurance athletes than everyday exercisers, but Pritchett notes that she knows of one mild case of hyponatremia in a middle-aged woman caused by hot yoga. (Also, if the room is humid and your body’s cooling mechanism can’t work as it should, drinking more water still isn’t going to stop you from getting hot.)

Bottom line: Start slow, listen to your body, and drink when you’re thirsty. The more you do hot yoga, the better your body will be able to tolerate the heat. That’s good news for hot yoga devotees—which I probably don’t think I’ll ever be. But I’ll definitely be cheering you on, and admiring your ability to handle the heat, from the air-conditioned lobby.



## Keywords

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