Yoga has been practiced for thousands of years in India and has risen in popularity in the United States as a form of stress management. It is based on the belief that the mind and body are one. Yoga combines exercises, called postures, and proper breathing. While practicing a posture, you concentrate on your breathing which helps relax your muscles, maintain the posture and focus your mind.

A common misconception is that you must be nimble and flexible to practice it, but the truth is that anyone can do yoga. There are several different forms of yoga to choose from, so be sure to select the best style that meets your fitness level and goals. Yoga has many health benefits and can be practiced anywhere, any time. Even with a busy lifestyle, there are simple ways to incorporate some stretching techniques into your day to help you feel relaxed and refreshed.

**TYPES OF YOGA**

- **Lyengar:** This is a slow-paced style of yoga that is perfect for beginners. It is detail-oriented and teaches proper alignment. It incorporates props (belts, blocks and folded blankets) to modify the poses so they are easier for beginners.

- **Ashtanga:** This is a traditional style of yoga which involves continuous poses that are of high intensity. It focuses on ujjayi breathing (in/out through the nose) throughout the exercises.

- **Power:** This is one of the most athletic forms of yoga. Through a sequence of poses in Ashtanga, the focus is on improving upper body strength, flexibility and balance. It is also known as Flow Yoga or Vinyasa Flow. It is typically offered in heated rooms.

- **Bikram:** This form of yoga is practiced in a heated room (typically 100 degree or more). Each class is a sequence of 26 poses designed to stretch and strengthen muscles and release toxins from the body. (Those who suffer from high blood pressure or diabetes should consult their health care provider before beginning this type of yoga).

- **Kundalini:** This is a spiritual and philosophical style of yoga that is designed to awaken energy in the spine. It focuses on meditation, breathing techniques, chanting and yoga poses.

- **Hatha:** This is the original practice of yoga that focuses on the physical poses, rather than the breathing exercises. However, this form of yoga is now often combined with other styles to create a form of yoga that is great for beginners.

- **Viniyoga:** This is a gentle style of yoga that focuses on flexibility. It is an ideal style for beginners or those who are recovering from an injury.

In addition to relieving stress, yoga has been shown to lower blood pressure, increase flexibility and enhance brain function. Those who practice yoga may also have improved skeletal alignment, stronger bones and joints, deeper peace of mind, mental focus and an increase in happiness and inner peace.
FINDING TIME TO STRETCH
Whether you prefer to practice yoga in a group setting, or in the privacy of your own home, there are many options for choosing the method that works best for you. If your day is too busy to block off time for a yoga session, you can still sneak in some stretching to help you re-focus and re-energize.

- Try a few yoga stretches each morning to help you wake up. There are videos geared toward starting your day with yoga. In fact, some videos are less than 20 minutes and can easily fit into your morning routine.
- Take a 5-10 minute break during your workday and do some “office yoga.” Here is a website you can check out for some simple stretches that can be done at your desk: www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/stretching-exercises-at-your-desk-12-simple-tips?page=2.
- Take a yoga class at a nearby fitness center over your lunch break. You’ll feel recharged and refreshed to finish your day.
- Unwind at the end of your day with seated meditation. Some meditation ideas: pray, reflect on a happy memory, or think of something in your life for which you are grateful.
- Check out your local community college for yoga classes that are offered to the public.

SAFE STRETCHING
Although yoga might seem like a relatively “safe” activity, there are risks associated with it if you are not careful.

1. Always consult your health care provider before beginning a yoga program, especially if you are pregnant or have a pre-existing health condition. He or she will be able to recommend the type and level that is best for you.
2. Know your limits and stay within them. Before beginning any new type of yoga, research its physical demands. Speak with your health care provider or a certified yoga instructor to be sure that it’s suitable for you.
3. Go slow. Learn the basics such as proper breathing and how to maintain balance before you attempt the more ambitious stretches.
4. Warm up before every session.
5. Wear proper clothing. Wear clothes that allow you to move freely.
6. Stay hydrated, especially if you are practicing a form of “hot” yoga.
7. Pay attention to your body. Yoga isn’t supposed to hurt. If you feel pain, stop. See your health care provider for any persistent pain.

Call a Blues on Call Health Coach at 1-888-BLUE-428 to speak to a Health Coach about stress management.

Go to www.highmarkblueshield.com and log on to your member website.

Click on the Health & Wellness tab and select the Healthy Living link.