

Diving Fitness: Water Yoga for Divers

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Diving is a highly sensory personal experience. The feel of weightlessness and water on the skin, the steady sound of breathing and bubbles, and visual movements of fascinating creatures elicit healthful vibes. Pure joy is experienced in the freedom of flying with a current. Healing calmness is found by simply sitting in the sand and meditating on dappled streams of light. For divers' many of the benefits of Yoga and other spiritual disciplines exist in the serene underwater environment we explore.



Lotus Position Underwater. Divers can enjoy Aqua Yoga as part of a balanced fitness for diving program. Photograph: istockphoto / Copyright: microgen

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To enjoy the diving lifestyle as long as possible, divers are encouraged to stay fit and healthy. Diving itself is physical activity, but not exercise. This is most evident in open water training when divers learn to avoid exertion during diving to reduce risks and conserve air. Research supports the importance of establishing and maintaining fitness and health on dry land for diving. Fortunately for divers, dry land includes swimming pools and divers that can't get enough of the water have the options of water aerobics classes, swimming laps for fitness and Aqua Yoga.

Aqua Yoga classes can be found in many communities and are conducted in swimming pools incorporating a variety of Yoga disciplines. Postures are sometimes modified to keep the head above the water. The Downward Dog is changed to the Upward Dog and performed using floatation noodles. Other Aqua Yoga classes are performed below the surface using breath control techniques. Divers may particularly enjoy Yoga in a saltwater pool rather than chlorinated water. Exercise in the pool, with or without equipment, has been a part of fitness therapy, programming and sport performance for decades. Taking Yoga to the pool is a natural next step. Just be careful not to get in too deep.

In 2010, a Yoga, Aquatics and SCUBA Instructor published the Underwater Yoga Journal. The report which recommended Yoga in the pool, takes a turn away from known diving research by proposing additional depths and the use of SCUBA equipment to perform exercise underwater including an aerobic warm-up underwater. Recommendations were to exercise at 20 feet below and depths that require SCUBA certification. So how shallow is considered SCUBA diving? Is there a definitive depth for avoiding exertion? Or, is the distinction for avoiding exertion related to whether participants are wearing SCUBA gear at any depth as seen in shallow-water dive certifications with limits of 30 feet? Experience reveals there is a small amount of sound research, a lot of misinformation and even more opinions on the subject. After all, SCUBA Diving remains SCUBA Diving and Yoga is Yoga.

Divers can safely enjoy Aqua Yoga according to the Aquatic Exercise Association (AEA) and other water fitness agency standards and guidelines as part of a balanced fitness for diving program. The AEA standards and guidelines describe depth as follows: "Pools with a depth range of 3.5 – 4.5 feet (1.07 – 1.37 meters) seem to be the most useful for typical shallow water fitness classes; pools with a depth of 3-5 feet (0.91 – 1.52 meters) will accommodate nearly all heights of participants. A gradual slope of the pool bottom is preferred to accommodate varying heights of participants. A steep slope may lead to musculoskeletal stress. Deep water exercise is most successful at a depth where a body can be suspended vertically and is free to move in any direction and speed, without experiencing impact or weight bearing stress. A pool depth of 6.5 feet (1.98 meters) or more provides the ideal environment for a deep water class. In some situations, either due to the pool slope, depth or the height of the participant, it is necessary to perform a modified deep water workout. A modified deep format would incorporate floatation equipment but movement adaptation would be necessary as compared to typical deep water training. For example, full range of motion cross country skis would be modified to prevent striking the feet on the bottom of the pool."

Warm Up Before Aqua Yoga

An aerobic warm-up is recommended before Yoga and other forms of exercise. All warm ups should begin low and slow gradually working up to increases in breathing and heart rate over a period of 10 to 15 minutes. The easiest way to accomplish this is to walk beginning at a pace of 1.5 miles per hour and increasing to 3.0 miles per hour. Warming up prepares the body (including the heart, blood vessels, lungs and muscles) for the more intense exercise of the workout session, helps to prevent injury during exercise, and reduce soreness that some divers may experience after exercise. More specifically, according to the American College of Sports Medicine, moving the body through a gradual progression utilizing large muscles increases blood flow to muscles, increases the speed of nerve impulses, enhances the flow of oxygen to muscles and removal of waste products. This preparation of the body enhances performance during the workout. Also during this warm up synovial fluid (an oily substance in the joints) changes in response to exercise lubricating the joints. Divers with respiratory conditions or allergies may find a longer warm up helps prevent exercise induced asthma. Divers who participate in group exercise may be accustomed to warm ups consisting of a low intensity sampling of the same movements that will be performed during the class. During strength training workouts, even after a pre-workout warm up, it is recommended that the first set of each exercise be performed with less weight before performing working sets at higher intensity. Stretching by itself is not a warm up, but may be performed afterward.