

Study: Heated Yoga Shown to Ease Depressive Symptoms

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Practicing heated yoga significantly reduced depression symptoms in adults with moderate to severe depression, with more than half of participants experiencing their symptoms cut by at least half after eight weeks
- The more heated yoga classes participants attended, the greater their improvement, showing that building a consistent routine delivers better results than attending only occasionally
- Heated yoga improved depression symptoms in adults of different ages, sexes and educational backgrounds, and it benefited people whether or not they were already taking antidepressant medication
- Participants experienced meaningful improvements even though most attended fewer classes than researchers recommended, suggesting that you don't need perfect attendance to benefit from a regular exercise routine
- Exercise supports a healthier mood beyond heated yoga, and combining regular physical activity with nutritious food, quality sleep, morning sunlight and stress-reducing habits helps create lasting improvements in emotional well-being

Depression goes beyond a rough week. It shows up as persistent sadness, lost interest in things you once enjoyed, disrupted sleep, shifting appetite, low energy and a foggy inability to concentrate — and it doesn't lift on its own after a few days. As it progresses, it affects your relationships, your ability to work, your physical health and, in the most severe cases, increases your risk of suicide.

The World Health Organization estimates that about 350 million people worldwide live with depression, and even with modern treatment, only about half of people respond well to antidepressant medications or psychotherapy.¹ Many who do improve struggle with side effects such as weight gain, fatigue, sleep disturbances and cognitive problems.

That gap between how many people need help and how well current treatments deliver it is exactly why researchers have been testing approaches that improve symptoms without adding another prescription, including one that combines two familiar practices: yoga and heat. Heated yoga takes place in a room warmed to roughly 90 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit, where structured postures and breathing exercises place greater demands on both your body and mind.

Previous research has shown benefits from traditional yoga on its own and from whole-body hyperthermia, a treatment that deliberately raises body temperature under controlled conditions.² Heated yoga combines physical movement, controlled breathing, mindfulness and sustained warmth in a single session, but the question has been whether this combination delivers measurable relief for people living with clinical depression.

Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital and collaborating institutions tested heated yoga in a rigorous clinical trial, then published their findings in two stages. The first publication established whether the intervention worked under real-world conditions and whether people would actually stick with it.

The second, published in 2026, went deeper into the same trial data to answer a follow-up question: does attending more classes lead to greater improvement? Because both analyses draw from the same 80-participant trial, their findings reinforce each other rather than simply repeating the same conclusions.

Heated Yoga Reduced Depression Symptoms Under Real-World Conditions

The original publication from this trial focused on the question researchers needed to answer first — whether heated yoga was practical enough for people with depression to follow through on, and whether it produced meaningful results under everyday conditions. Published in *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, the study enrolled 80 adults who were randomly assigned to either an eight-week heated yoga program or an eight-week waitlist before researchers compared changes in clinician-rated depression scores.³

Unlike tightly controlled laboratory studies, this trial evaluated heated yoga as people would actually experience it in everyday life. Participants continued their usual medical care, including antidepressant medications when applicable, allowing researchers to determine whether heated yoga offered additional benefits alongside standard treatment. Attendance rates and participant feedback also demonstrated that most people found the program practical enough to incorporate into their weekly routines.

- **More than half the participants achieved a major reduction in depression symptoms** — Researchers defined a treatment response as at least a 50% reduction in depression symptoms using a standardized clinician assessment. By the end of eight weeks, 59.3% of participants in the heated yoga group reached that milestone compared with only 6.3% of those assigned to the waitlist.

Researchers also measured remission, meaning symptoms improved enough that participants no longer met the criteria for active depression.

Twelve participants in the heated yoga group achieved remission compared with just two in the waitlist group. Overall, clinician-rated depression scores improved substantially more in the heated yoga group, with statistical analysis showing a large treatment effect rather than a small or borderline difference.

- **Participants benefited even without perfect attendance** — Volunteers were encouraged to attend at least two heated yoga classes each week during the eight-week program. In reality, participants attended an average of 10.3 classes over the

entire study, or just over one class per week.⁴ Even though attendance fell below the recommended schedule, the heated yoga group still experienced significantly greater reductions in depression symptoms than the waitlist group.

Only 36% of participants completed 12 or more classes, yet the overall results remained strongly positive. These findings suggest that building a consistent routine matters more than maintaining perfect attendance, making heated yoga a realistic option for people balancing work, family and other responsibilities.

At the same time, the dose-response findings from the extended analysis⁵ showed that participants who attended more classes experienced greater reductions in depression symptoms throughout the program. Taken together, these results deliver a clear and encouraging message: even one class per week produced meaningful improvement, and attending two or more classes per week produced even more.

- **The improvements were seen in a broad group of adults** — The average participant was 32.7 years old, and more than 81% were women, but researchers found no meaningful differences between the study groups before treatment that could explain the results. Participants also represented different racial and ethnic backgrounds, making the findings more reflective of patients seen in community practice.

Because volunteers continued taking antidepressants and receiving other existing treatments throughout the trial, the results indicate that heated yoga complemented standard care rather than replacing it. Classes also took place in community heated yoga studios instead of specialized research facilities, showing that the intervention closely resembled what many people could realistically access where they live.

- **The study demonstrated that people were willing to stick with the program** — One of the investigators' primary goals was to determine whether adults with moderate to severe depression would participate in a physically demanding heated yoga program for eight weeks. The favorable attendance rates and positive participant experiences showed that the program was practical and well accepted.

Rather than evaluating an approach that only succeeds under ideal research conditions, the study demonstrated that heated yoga fit into everyday life while still delivering meaningful reductions in depression symptoms.

More Hot Yoga Classes Led to Greater Reductions in Depression Symptoms

In the 2026 analysis published in the Journal of Affective Disorders, the researchers examined whether the total number of classes attended influenced how much participants improved.⁶ To answer that question, they combined data from both groups during the periods when participants actually practiced heated yoga, allowing them to evaluate the relationship between attendance and recovery across everyone who received the intervention.

- **Depression symptoms fell substantially over the eight-week program** — Among the 65 participants who completed follow-up assessments, clinician-rated depression scores decreased by an average of about 13 points on a 0-84 depression scale, representing a meaningful reduction in symptom severity over just eight weeks.
- **The benefits were similar regardless of age, sex, education or antidepressant use** — Younger and older adults improved by similar amounts, as did men and women and people with different levels of education.⁷ Participants who were already taking [antidepressant medications](#) experienced about the same degree of improvement as those who were not taking medication. These findings suggest that hot yoga benefited a broad range of adults instead of helping only one specific type of patient.
- **Every additional class built on the progress from the previous one** — Researchers found that participants continued experiencing greater reductions in depression symptoms as they attended more hot yoga classes. Rather than reaching a point where additional sessions no longer made a difference, improvements continued throughout the entire eight-week program.

This finding suggests that consistency matters — sticking with the program produced greater benefits than attending only a few classes.

- **The study provides strong evidence while identifying important next steps** — This research used one of the strongest study designs available for evaluating an intervention. Combining data from both treatment periods also gave investigators a wider range of attendance patterns to analyze. However, only 65 participants completed the follow-up assessments included in this analysis, and the intervention lasted just eight weeks.

Because participants weren't randomly assigned to attend different numbers of classes, researchers can't say with certainty that every additional class alone caused the extra improvement, even though the relationship was strong. Future studies involving larger groups of participants and longer follow-up periods will help determine the ideal amount of hot yoga needed to achieve the greatest reduction in depression symptoms.

- **Researchers are already testing whether heat makes yoga even more effective** — Building on the encouraging results of this trial, principal investigator Maren Nyer and her colleagues at Massachusetts General Hospital have launched a larger randomized study comparing heated yoga directly with non-heated yoga in 120 adults with depression.⁸

Participants will attend at least two classes each week during an eight-week program while researchers track changes in mood over a 20-week study period. By comparing the two approaches head-to-head, the investigators hope to determine whether the heated environment provides additional benefits beyond yoga itself.

If both approaches prove effective, the findings could strengthen the case for expanding access to yoga-based treatments for depression, including broader insurance coverage.

Build a Routine That Supports a Healthier Mood

The heated yoga research showed that consistent movement in a supportive environment reduced depression symptoms, even when participants fell short of the recommended schedule. That finding carries an important implication beyond yoga itself: your body responds to **regular physical activity**, and the benefits grow when you pair that movement with habits that support your brain, metabolism, gut health and sleep.

The following steps help you build a routine that amplifies the kind of gains the study participants experienced.

- 1. Choose exercise you enjoy and vary your routine** — The research in this article showed that heated yoga is an effective way to reduce depression symptoms, especially when practiced consistently. If you enjoy heated yoga and it's available where you live, it's an excellent addition to your routine because it combines physical activity, controlled breathing and mindfulness in a single session.

At the same time, you don't need to limit yourself to one type of exercise. **Mixing activities** such as heated or traditional yoga, brisk walking, cycling, swimming and strength training challenges your body in different ways, keeps exercise interesting and helps prevent boredom from derailing your progress.

I encourage you to choose activities you genuinely enjoy and rotate them throughout the week. Multiple studies have found that **exercise reduces depression** symptoms as effectively as antidepressant medication for many adults, without the burden of prescription side effects.⁹ So, the best exercise plan is one you look forward to doing and can maintain for years.

- 2. Build your fitness gradually instead of trying to do everything at once** — Depression often drains your motivation before you even begin. That's why starting small is so important. Begin with 10 to 15 minutes of movement each day, then slowly increase your time or intensity over the following weeks. Small victories build confidence, and confidence makes the next workout easier.

As your energy improves, add two or three weekly sessions of strength training or another activity you enjoy. **Strength training** helps preserve muscle, improves metabolic health and gives you visible signs of progress that reinforce your commitment. Aim to finish most workouts feeling energized rather than completely exhausted. If you regularly feel wiped out, dread your next workout or need hours to recover, reduce the intensity and build back up more gradually.

- 3. Support your brain by improving cellular energy production** — Exercise delivers its greatest benefits when your brain has the fuel it needs to function properly. I recommend eating enough carbohydrates to support healthy metabolism — roughly 250 grams each day for most adults, with higher amounts if you're especially active. Build those carbohydrates around whole fruit and other well-tolerated foods instead of ultraprocessed products.

Keep your protein intake adequate — aim for about 0.8 grams of protein per pound of lean body mass (or 1.76 grams per kilogram), with one-third coming from **collagen-rich sources** like slow-cooked meats or bone broth. At the same time, eliminate seed oils such as soybean, corn, sunflower, safflower and canola oil. These oils contain excessive **linoleic acid** (LA), a polyunsaturated fat that accumulates in your tissues and interferes with healthy mitochondrial function.

Mitochondria are the tiny structures inside your cells that produce the energy your brain depends on for mood, motivation and focus. I recommend keeping LA intake below 5 grams per day, with an ideal target closer to 2 grams. If you want an easy way to monitor your intake, the Pax health platform, coming soon, will include Food Buddy and the Seed Oil Sleuth. This is a special feature designed to help identify hidden sources of LA in your diet as well as estimate the total daily intake.

- 4. Improve your gut health and your body clock together** — Your digestive system and your brain constantly exchange signals through nerves, hormones and your immune system. When your **gut becomes unhealthy**, inflammation rises and those signals begin working against you instead of for you. Supporting digestive health helps create a better environment for emotional resilience.

I recommend eating enough carbohydrates to support healthy energy production while choosing foods that match your digestive tolerance. Pair that with 10 to 20 minutes of outdoor sunlight shortly after waking each morning. Early sunlight helps reset your circadian rhythm — your body's internal clock that regulates sleep, hormones, energy production and mood. Better sleep strengthens your emotional resilience, improves recovery from exercise and makes healthy habits easier to maintain.

- 5. Give your nervous system time to recover every day** — Depression often leaves your body stuck in a chronic stress response. While movement helps interrupt that cycle, recovery matters just as much as exercise itself. Heated yoga naturally includes slow, controlled breathing that encourages your nervous system to shift away from a constant fight-or-flight state, but you can practice slow breathing during any type of exercise or even while sitting quietly at home.

Support that calming response throughout the day by keeping a consistent sleep schedule, limiting bright artificial light after sunset and creating a relaxing bedtime routine. If you continue to struggle with restlessness or poor sleep, supplemental **GABA**, typically 500 milligrams (mg) to 2,000 mg (2 grams) daily, often supports relaxation and sleep quality. Lower doses around 100 mg have also shown benefits.

Combining GABA with L-theanine, an amino acid found naturally in tea, further enhances these calming effects because L-theanine works through many of the same pathways that help quiet an overactive nervous system. Together, these habits create the conditions your brain and body need to restore healthy mood, steady energy and long-term resilience.

FAQs About Heated Yoga for Depression

Q: Does hot yoga really help reduce depression symptoms?

A: Yes. A randomized controlled trial found that adults with moderate to severe depression experienced significantly greater reductions in depression symptoms after participating in a heated yoga program than those assigned to a waitlist. More than half of the participants achieved at least a 50% reduction in symptoms, and many improved enough that they no longer met the criteria for active depression.

Q: Do I have to attend every class to see benefits?

A: No. Participants were encouraged to attend two classes each week, but the average person attended just over one class weekly and still experienced meaningful improvements. The research also showed that the more classes people attended, the greater their reduction in depression symptoms, making consistency more important than perfect attendance.

Q: Does hot yoga work if I'm already taking antidepressants?

A: The research suggests it does. Participants who were taking antidepressant medications improved by about the same amount as those who weren't taking medication. Rather than replacing standard treatment, heated yoga appeared to provide additional benefits alongside the care participants were already receiving.

Q: Is heated yoga the only type of exercise that helps depression?

A: No. The studies focused specifically on heated yoga, but regular exercise of many kinds has been shown to reduce depression symptoms. If heated yoga appeals to you, it offers the added combination of movement, breathing exercises and mindfulness. If not, activities such as walking, traditional yoga, cycling, swimming and strength training also support better mood when practiced consistently.

Q: What daily habits make exercise more effective for improving mood?

A: Exercise works best when it's combined with other healthy habits that support brain function. Eating enough nutritious carbohydrates and protein, avoiding seed oils high in LA, maintaining good gut health, getting morning sunlight to regulate your body clock and prioritizing restorative sleep all help create an environment that supports healthy mood and emotional resilience.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2, 5, 6} [Journal of Affective Disorders July 15, 2026, Volume 405, 121647](#)
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- ⁸ [Mass General Brigham, Feeling Down? Try Heated or Non-Heated Yoga for Depression](#)
- ⁹ [Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews January 8, 2025](#)