



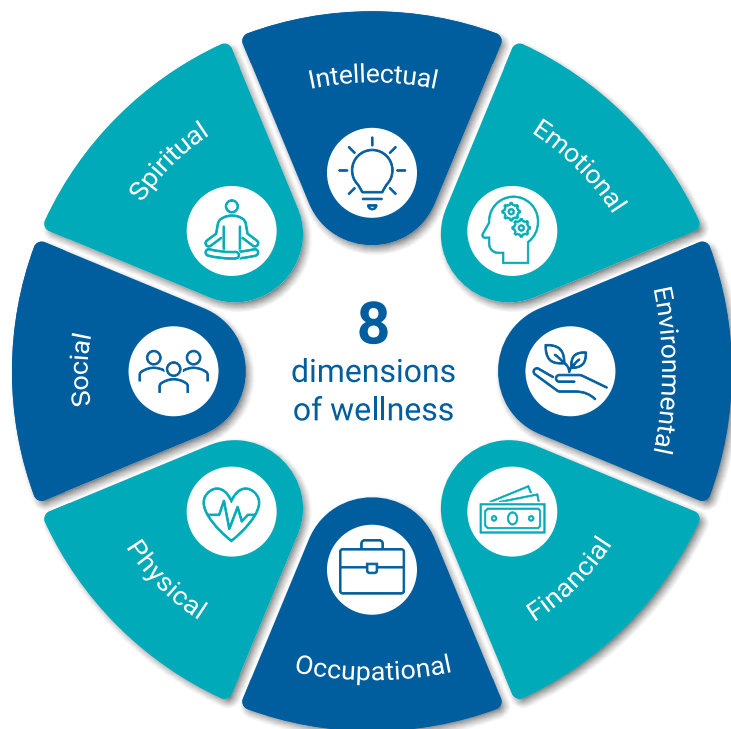
Mass General Brigham
Health Plan

Become a healthier you
by supporting these
8 dimensions of wellness



The 8 dimensions of wellness

Taking care of yourself today requires you to take care of your whole self, which means supporting the areas of wellness that include, but go beyond physical health and wellness.



Do you see how all of these areas are connected?

Each wellness area offers an essential contribution to your overall health and quality of life. The holistic integration ultimately helps you live life more fully, which is why neglecting one area can hurt another dimension.

What's important to remember is that health looks different for everyone. If you want to achieve optimal health, you can start by evaluating each wellness area in your everyday life—and then make improvements or adjustments based on your personal needs. We'll get you started by exploring each wellness dimension on the following pages.



Select a wheel dimension to learn more!

Routine checkups are just the start of powering your healthiest self. Whole health is bounded by your:

- **Physical wellness** supports your body.
- **Intellectual wellness** supports your mind with a willingness to continue learning.
- **Emotional wellness** supports your mind too, to help you understand feelings and manage emotions.
- **Social wellness** supports the relationships in your life, including the connection you have with your community.
- **Spiritual wellness** aligns with your beliefs, values, and purpose.
- **Occupational wellness** ensures that your work enriches your life and aligns with your values.
- **Financial wellness** ties into managing your resources and making informed decisions.
- **Environmental wellness** acknowledges how your actions impact our planet and how that impacts your health.

Intellectual wellness

No matter your age, exercising your brain in a focused and deliberate way can provide numerous benefits that lead to better attention and faster learning. Intellectual wellness supports the continued development of a person's knowledge and skillset. Evolving your intellectual wellness can help you live a more balanced life through critical thinking, idea development, artistic ability, listening skills, memory practices, traveling somewhere unknown, or exploring new hobbies. A [study in the journal Memory](#) found that people with good memory tend to have a stronger sense of purpose overall, contributing to better mental and physical health.

“ Intellectual wellness supports the continued development of a person's knowledge and skillset. ”

Intellectual wellness is like a muscle that needs exercise, so start using these tools to give it a workout:



Light dumbbells

A [study](#) found that even one session of strength exercises can improve memory performance. Regular training is even better: [Research from The University of Sydney](#) in Australia showed that lifting weights can slow and even halt age-related brain changes, especially the parts of the brain vulnerable to Alzheimer's disease.



Mindfulness & sleep app

Sleep affects all of your brain functions, including mood, judgment, perception, and learning. [Research from Harvard University](#) notes that sleep is when your memories get organized and stored, so skimping on your shuteye can have serious effects on your memory. If you struggle with sleep, consider [trying an app](#) like Headspace, Calm, Smiling Mind, and 10% Happier.



Music player

According to a [study in the journal PLOS ONE](#), listening to music you describe as “happy” can prompt creativity, problem-solving, and a positive mood, contributing to better memory function. For some people, even having music on in the background can help with memory capacity.



Language learning app

According to [research](#), a few months of a language program can lead to functional changes in the brain, especially among older people. There are [plenty of language-learning apps](#) that are easy to use, and many offer a free trial, with options like Duolingo, Babbel, Pimsleur, and Rosetta Stone.



Jigsaw puzzles

Jigsaw puzzles [have been shown](#) to use multiple types of cognitive function and can even protect your brain as you get older. Not only are you challenging your memory and concentration, but doing a puzzle can also help reduce stress, according to [Baylor University](#).



Emotional wellness

Emotional wellness centers around how you're able to react to situations and express your feelings, which is critical to mental health. Strengthening one's emotional wellness can help a person adapt during times of change—and maintain control during moments of stress or difficulty. Emotional wellness can also impact an individual's performance of everyday activities along with their interactions that sustain their professional, platonic, and romantic relationships.

“ The APA reported an increase in the need for anxiety and depressive disorder treatments since the start of the pandemic. ”

What's been revolutionary to learn during the pandemic is the demand increase for behavioral health services. The American Psychological Association (APA) found that 68 percent of psychologists with a waitlist reported that it had grown longer since the start of the pandemic. More specifically, psychologists reported an increase in the need for anxiety and depressive disorder treatments. APA also found that other treatment areas with greater demand included sleep-wake disorders, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, and substance-related and addictive disorders.

When it comes to supporting your mental health, that can include therapy, wellness checks, managing chronic conditions, and prescription

medication. Today, that care can be delivered in a number of ways but lifestyle, diet, and nutrition also play a big part in one's emotional wellness. What you eat can be significant for creating a ripple effect that helps lower stress, deepen sleep, and feel calmer.

Mindful eating

The promise of diet as a mental health tool is so strong that a new, rapidly emerging field has been created called “nutritional psychiatry,” according to a 2017 editorial in the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. Those authors point out that, increasingly, research is finding links between a highly-processed diet and risk for depression and anxiety.

Why the connection? How does diet affect emotional wellness?



Gut-brain power

An unhealthy diet negatively affects the beneficial bacteria in the gut. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), your gut function influences brain chemistry, including pain perception, stress response, and emotions.



Lower inflammation

A diet that's high in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and lean protein [has been shown](#) to lower inflammation. Not only does that decrease health risks in general, such as cardiovascular disease, but [research suggests](#) it also reduces the likelihood of developing depression over time.



Consumption of vitamins & fatty acids

A diet that's less reliant on highly processed foods tend to offer a higher amount of vitamins and minerals, such as folic acid and magnesium, as well as fatty acids found in foods like fish. [Research suggests](#) the dietary intake of these compounds is linked to lower depression.



Better habit stacking

When you change one habit toward improved health, it's easier to [keep building on that progress](#). A diet that makes you feel more balanced and energetic could lead to more exercise and a better sleep routine. You may feel inspired to socialize, start a gratitude journal, learn new skills, go hiking, drink more water, or quit smoking.

[Experts believe that habit change is often difficult](#) because people tend to take an all-or-nothing approach, so rather than throwing out everything in the fridge and starting from nothing, [try a gentler strategy](#) that builds healthier diet habits over time. For example:

- Try one new-to-you vegetable this week
- Replace a high-calorie, low-nutrient snack with a healthy one today
- Write down what you eat, or use an app so you can understand the nutrition behind what you're eating regularly
- Research a healthy new recipe to try
- Notice your eating cues, like snacking when you're bored or watching TV
- Recruit a friend to join you for a healthy eating challenge
- Eat only when you're truly hungry

Another smart strategy? [Talk to your healthcare provider](#) about a referral to a dietitian or other nutrition professional, especially if you have a condition like diabetes or heart disease. Most of all, see diet changes as part of a lifelong opportunity to improve your mental health, one meal at a time.



Environmental wellness

Environmental wellness is supported by the relationship one has with their community and the society they live in. One's wellbeing is deeply connected to the relationship they have with their environment. Becoming more environmentally conscious is a good starting point toward changing your habits. So, if you're ready to support your environmental wellness here are five ways you can help your environment—and the planet:



Consider your water usage

According to the [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#), the average family in the United States uses over 300 gallons of water every day. The EPA notes that less than 1 percent of the Earth's water is available for human use.

Having an idea of how much you use can help you transition toward better conservation practices. For example, you might take shorter showers, water your lawn less often, wait to do laundry until you have a full load, and check your pipes for leaks.



Get energy efficient

Much like being aware of your water usage, staying mindful about other utilities can not only help the planet, but also your energy bills. There are numerous small [changes for better efficiency](#) that add up, including:

- Washing clothes in cold water
- Getting an energy audit from your utility company
- Sealing cracks, gaps, and leaks, especially around windows
- Replacing air filters in your furnace regularly so the system runs efficiently
- Using washers and dryers in the evening, to reduce strain on the power grid during peak hours
- Installing a programmable thermostat that lowers your heat if you're gone during the day
- Buying appliances that have a high Energy Star rating



Buy nontoxic cleaners

Heavily scented cleaning products might be contributing to the overall toxic load in indoor air. Switching to eco-friendly, green cleaners is a good habit that can affect your personal health as well, since you're not breathing in volatile compounds. You can also make your own cleaners from items you probably already have on hand, such as vinegar, baking soda, lemon juice, and hydrogen peroxide.



Choose low-impact food

Pivot toward buying from farmers who use regenerative agriculture methods, which rely on grazing animals for better soil health. Healthy soil is an important part of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and is crucial for utilizing water efficiently and providing food security, according to Rodale Institute. Supporting farmers who take a regenerative approach can help reverse climate change, the organization notes.

Another major shift is to buy fruits and vegetables that are sourced locally whenever possible. Even if produce is organic, which is beneficial for reducing toxic pesticides in the environment, it's still problematic when it's coming from halfway around the world, due to the carbon footprint involved in shipping.



Bike, walk, rideshare, and use public transportation

A typical passenger vehicle emits about 4.6 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year, according to the EPA. While you may not be able to give up driving completely, especially if you live in a more rural location, becoming more aware of driving habits can be helpful for reducing your usage. The EPA also suggests getting regular tune-ups so your vehicle runs more efficiently, and considering one that's less polluting like a hybrid or electric vehicle.

It might seem like little habits such as maintaining your car, watering your lawn less often, turning off lights you don't need, and shopping at the farmers market don't make much of a difference, but they really do add up over time and make you feel good about doing more to support the planet's health.

Financial wellness

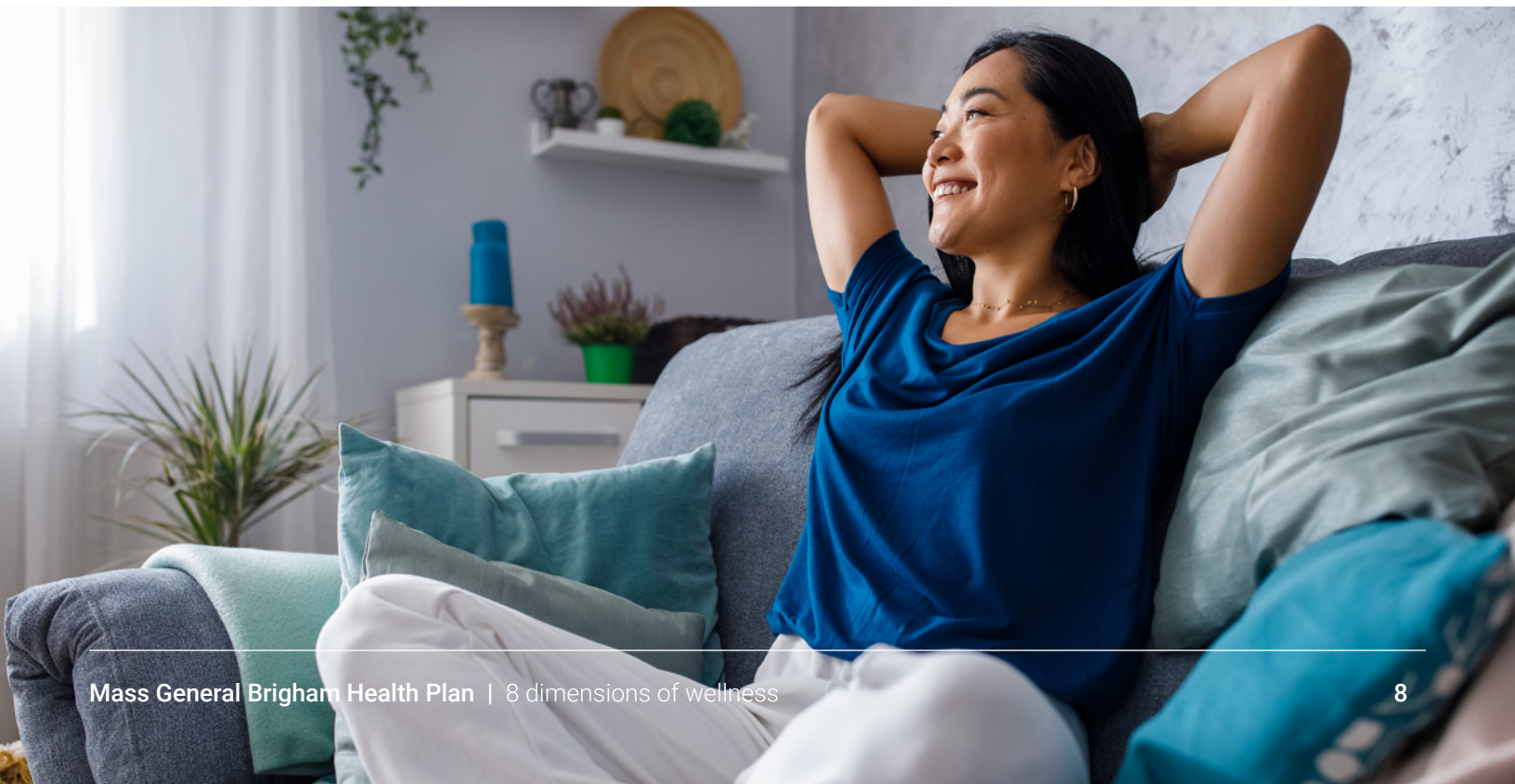
When considering health and wellness strategies, the most likely changes tend to be focused on nutrition or activity. While these are incredibly important, financial stability deserves a place on the list, too.

Financial wellness is fostered through a sense of security through monetary actions that can support a stable future. That doesn't necessarily mean having a chunk of ready cash in your savings account, or even robust investments. Financial stability is more about feeling a sense of control over your finances. With a stronger sense of awareness about where your money is going and how you can direct it in a way that reduces stress, it can be a boost for your emotional and physical health. So, let's take a look at how financial wellness impacts your quality of life, along with some strategies to feel more secure.

“ Stronger awareness about where your money is going and how you can direct it in a way that reduces stress. can boost your emotional and physical health ”

Money's role in your health

One of the major ways that finances can impact your wellness is through stress, and it's possible you may have been feeling this long before the pandemic caused difficulty. If that's the case, you're far from alone. A [2021 study](#) by the Finra Investor Education Foundation and Global Financial Literacy Excellence Center found that even before COVID-19, a substantial share of U.S. households were feeling strained due to finances, in part because of problematic financial behaviors and decreased financial security. The report noted that 60% of adults ages 21 to 62 felt anxious when thinking about personal finances, and 50% reported feeling stressed about discussing the issue.



Research indicates ongoing stress can have toxic effects such as:

- Disrupted sleep
- Memory issues
- Difficulty paying attention and making decisions
- Lower immune system function
- Higher likelihood of cardiovascular disease
- Poor gastrointestinal function
- Disrupted hormone regulation

The good news is that you can create a sense of financial security that helps you feel more in control. There's a ripple effect there, too. When you have confidence in your financial health, your stress level can lower—helping you sleep better, have more energy, and make healthier food choices. From there, you might exercise more often, get fewer illnesses because of a robust immune system, and prevent health risks to your heart, gut, and brain.

In general, just knowing that your financial stability is part of your overall health and wellness mix can be important. That might pinpoint the source of your stress so you can begin to address it in a way that prompts other health benefits, too.

Here are some steps to consider:



Track your finances for several months.

Looking at one or two months of your spending will give you a good amount of information, but a better approach is to get the biggest timeframe possible.



Be objective instead of regretful.

Finances can cause a mix of emotions, so try to see your finances with the perspective of what needs to be done, not as a way to berate yourself.



Talk to your benefits manager.

Meet with your benefits manager to help you save more for retirement, switch healthcare plans, increase your insurance, or reduce your tax liability.



See a professional.

A financial advisor or financial planner may be more affordable than you think—and can offer more ideas for helping you eliminate financial risk.



Occupational wellness

On average, **people spend 1/3 of their lives at work; that's 90,000 hours spent on one's occupation.** That's why it's so important that the occupation we choose must support a balance between health, compensation, and accomplishments. This has never been more relevant as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 4 million Americans quit their jobs in July 2021.

Research shows that the need to support overall health is driving the decision-making process for many of today's employees. A healthy workforce is much more likely to show higher levels of employee productivity and performance, according to survey results from the nonprofit Health Enhancement Research Organization. The survey found that most respondents view health as an investment in human capital or as part of an organization's core business strategy.

Occupational wellness can have a significant effect on workforce productivity, especially with outcomes like these:



Lower rates of absenteeism

When employees start maximizing sick days, take time off without warning, leave early and come in late, that's absenteeism. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that productivity losses linked to absenteeism cost employers \$225 billion annually.



Higher employee engagement

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) notes that high levels of engagement have a significant ripple effect, including higher customer loyalty levels.



Lower turnover

The recent "Great Resignation" wave has highlighted the costs of replacing employees. According to some estimates, replacing workers requires up to two times the employee's annual salary in some cases. For the employees who stay put, productivity can tank.

Physical wellness

Of all the dimensions of wellness, you're probably most familiar with physical wellness, which can include exercise, diet, and annual visits with your primary care physician. Meeting with your doctor can include bloodwork, screenings, and maintenance of symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment. That's why trust between patients and doctors is so important to for optimal physical health.

PLOS ONE found a correlation between patient trust in healthcare professionals and health outcomes. Those who trusted their doctors are more likely to follow treatment instructions and tend to have fewer symptoms. They reported higher satisfaction with treatment and improved quality of life. Lack of trust can be a major barrier when trying to deliver quality care. If a patient isn't forthcoming or comfortable, that can lead to providing incomplete information and a subsequently inaccurate diagnosis.

According to a 2021 survey done by the University of Chicago, and commissioned by the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation, patient trust increases with age and income but overall, **about 78% of patients in the survey reported that they trusted their primary physician.**

Strategies providers can employ to support an environment where both patients and their healthcare providers feel connected to one another:



Make eye contact

Some patients may notice this on a subconscious level, leaving them to walk away feeling distrustful but they're not sure why.



Talk about money

Healthcare affordability is a huge topic, but often isn't discussed in the context of treatment, which has contributed to receding trust, according to the JAMA Network. Addressing the potential financial costs of treatments acknowledges that some patients may have to make decisions based on the health of their bank account, not just their physical health.



Fight for more time

The main factor that builds trust is time spent in a one-on-one appointment. An opinion piece in Medical Economics suggests that healthcare providers show administrators the research that time leads to trust, which can offer better outcomes.



Network

Ask other healthcare providers what they do to build trust, similar to inquiring about new treatment options or condition-specific information.

Taking the first steps to build trust can go a long way toward improving outcomes and quality of life—for everyone involved.



Social wellness

Social wellness is built by the interactions we have with individuals in our community that can create genuine connections, supportive relationships, and progression. That's why social wellness is dependent on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Although these issues that have seen progress toward equality there's still a considerable amount of work to be done.



Diagnosis and treatment for women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) have made strides toward equity, but disparities still represent an unfortunate reality in levels of care. Here are just a few of the differences:

- Black people are over three times more likely to die from COVID-19 than white people, and risk of death within the Latinx population is nearly twice that of the white population.
- Racism is strongly associated with mental health difficulties, particularly for Asian Americans and Latinx groups in one study, and contributes to poorer general health overall.
- Maternal mortality rates are much higher among BIPOC groups, with Black women bearing a disproportionate share of maternal deaths.
- BIPOC communities are significantly underrepresented in clinical trials, such as those testing new types of vaccines.
- Black children have disproportionately worse asthma outcomes compared to white children, including higher rates of hospitalization and deaths.
- One major study suggests that physicians are less attentive to risk factors in women, and less willing to listen and communicate with these patients.

These are just a few examples of a widespread and pervasive issue that can have huge implications in quality of life, health outcomes, and longevity.

Why do disparities exist?

Health inequality is a complex issue, since it operates on multiple levels, from the personal biases of some healthcare professionals to systemic problems in healthcare organizations to cultural and social factors. Here's a quick look at how two of those play a part:

Implicit bias: According to the [Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University](#), implicit bias can include unconscious prejudice and stereotypes, and in a health care setting, that may lead to beliefs about certain patient groups.

For example, a [2016 survey of medical students](#) found that a substantial number of them believe Black people feel less pain than white people, which may explain why Black Americans tend to be undertreated for pain.

Social determinants of health: Outside of the exam room and even a health care system itself, disparities can also be traced to barriers like structural racism and economic inequality. These can limit access to resources that boost health, such as public parks, grocery stores, clinics, and affordable housing.

These are called social determinants of health, which the [World Health Organization](#) defines as conditions or circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. These conditions are shaped by political, social, and economic forces and they create considerable disparity in terms of health outcomes.

What can you do?

One step is to become more informed about what type of disparities may be affecting you, as a woman and/or person of color, in terms of screening and treatment.

For example, Black women develop lupus at a younger age and tend to have more life-threatening conditions—one report in [Georgia](#) noted that Black women had nearly three times the rate of the disease than white women, with significantly high incidence in their 30s. Making sure to ask for screening before age 40 could catch the disease earlier, when treatment can help manage the condition more effectively.

Another step is to become more informed about how [health disparities may be affecting you and your community](#), and to ask health providers how they're addressing issues like implicit bias. Of course, the burden of lifting these disparities shouldn't be on patients, but the willingness to have these conversations may prompt more meaningful care.



Do you have an implicit bias?

Take the quiz now to find out and learn the impact of your behavior:

[Go to quiz](#)



Spiritual wellness

Spiritual wellness focuses on your sense of purpose and meaning in life ties to both morals and ethics—and it may or may not involve religious actions. One way to support spiritual wellness is with yoga. No matter your level of experience, yoga works with everybody, while offering many health and relaxation benefits through breathwork, meditation, and bodily postures to support you along your wellness journey.

When we're stressed out, we may take shallow breaths or even hold our breath. Implementing yoga into your daily routine allows you to tie movement to your breath. Being mindful of our breathing enables access to more oxygen which can help manage stress and increase productivity. Yoga has also proven to improve the immune system and decrease inflammation.

That's why it's never too late to start yoga and start reaping the many health benefits. It's especially important for remote workers to ensure they're not seated for too long. Harvard Medical School found evidence that suggests spending too many hours sitting is hazardous to your health. They discovered that habitual inactivity raises risks for obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, deep-vein thrombosis, and metabolic syndrome. Yoga can help relieve even the most severe pain, including headaches, carpal tunnel, neck strain, shoulder stiffness, arthritis.



There's a yoga class for everybody

Whatever your style is, there is a yoga class for you. There's hot yoga for those that want a real good sweat and a workout that stretches tight muscles. There's also Yin yoga which focuses on breathing while holding poses for much longer. There's Vinyasa or flow yoga for individuals looking for more of an active session.

Yoga poses to relieve desk job pains





If you found this information useful, share it with friends and family.

If you're an employer, share it with your employees.



[MassGeneralBrighamHealthPlan.org](https://www.massgeneralbrighamhealthplan.org)

Mass General Brigham Health Plan includes Mass General Brigham Health Plan, Inc. and Mass General Brigham Health Insurance Company