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Find Fitness Bliss With NIA

NIA, a blend of yoga, martial arts, and dance, is one of the latest trends in mind-body fitness fusion.

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WebMD Feature

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Tired of walking the walk to nowhere on the treadmill? Burned out on the repetitive pounding of [aerobics](#)? If the term "joyful workout" sounds like an oxymoron to you, it might be time to give NIA a try. NIA (pronounced NEE-ah) stands for neuromuscular integrative action, and it's one of the latest trends in mind-body fitness fusion. A unique blending of the fluidity and focus of [Tai Chi](#) and [yoga](#), the grace and spontaneity of modern dance, and the energy and explosiveness of martial arts, NIA boosts both physical and emotional well-being, say enthusiasts around the country.

Best of all, NIA is just plain fun, says Sandy Bramlett, [MED](#), a NIA instructor and director of Bodywise Studio in Atlanta. "It's pleasurable, healthy and never boring. I'm 56 and feel like I can do it for the rest of my life."

While it's just catching on nationwide, the workout actually dates back to 1983 -- the height of the aerobics boom, NIA co-founder Debbie Rosas tells WebMD. Although the Santa Rosa, Calif., studio she was running at the time was doing very well, she and NIA co-founder Carlos Rosas decided her classes needed a jump-start.

"We started thinking, 'What are we doing to our bodies, to our students' bodies, with all this jumping up and down?'" she says. "Aerobics was too myopic, too limiting, cutting out a large amount of the population that needed to be moving. We wanted to address the whole body and mind."

And so NIA (which originally stood for non-impact aerobics) was born. Classes, which typically last an hour, are designed for all ages and fitness levels, says Bramlett, who has students ranging in age from 20-something to 88.

Even as they await published studies about NIA's effects on health, exercise physiologists and doctors praise the trendy workout for getting more people into some kind of fitness regimen.

"Anytime you get people moving in something they enjoy, you'll start to see health benefits," Richard Cotton, MA, exercise physiologist based in San Diego, Calif., tells WebMD.

"Too many Americans are still not exercising," says Cotton, who edits publications for the American Council on Exercise. "While NIA is more like Tai Chi than traditional aerobics, it certainly brings about changes in the body that enhance one's health. And it's a whole lot better than sitting around on the couch all day."

William O. Roberts, MD, vice president of the American College of Sports Medicine, agrees.

Roberts, who acknowledges he had to read up on the still relatively obscure NIA before speaking with WebMD, says, "Anything that keeps people moving is great. So if NIA is what gets them up and going, that's fantastic."

There's no doubt the workout improves strength and flexibility, adds Roberts, a family practitioner in private practice in White Bear Lake, Minn. "How much your heart rate gets going will dictate your cardiovascular benefit," he says

The NIA Experience

So just what makes up a NIA workout?

The first step: Kick your shoes off, Bramlett says. Then, as soft music plays, the instructor leads the class in deep-breathing exercises, designed to help students relax while meditating on the connection between their bare feet and the earth.

"We warm up our joints and muscles and get the energy flowing in preparation for doing more, working in space to increase range of motion, shifting weight, stimulating our body with movement so that our breathing increases, helping us to strengthen our heart and lungs," Bramlett says.

As the tempo livens, students start to shake, shimmy, and spin. Some rock and roll, others clap. As the freestyle dance continues, some burst into spontaneous song. Tae kwon do-style kicks and punches let off steam while boosting the heart rate.

While NIA teachers shun the drill-like orders of aerobics instructors, they gently lead the class in visualization and vocalization techniques, Rosas says. For example, students may be asked to shout "yes!" while lifting their arms to the sky, a means of releasing pent-up emotions.

"The more connected your body is to feelings, the more power, strength and grace you have, and the more stress you are able to release," Bramlett explains.

Rosas is careful to pay attention to the physical as well: For example, if she sees a student always lifting his arms with the palms facing down, she will instruct him to turn his palms up to "open up the shoulder joints.

"The healing component of NIA comes from using the body the way it was meant to be used," she explains.

In fact, the biggest benefit of the workout is "getting people in their body and connected to sensation," Rosas says.

She believes that many diseases occur because people don't notice early on that something is out of balance, citing as an example a man whose bleeding ulcer might have been averted had he detected tension in his abdominal wall and seen a doctor sooner.

Exercise physiologist Cotton concurs.

"Body awareness is increased through body movement," he says. "NIA, is new, cutting-edge, so it's hard to find research that proves a benefit like this. But it certainly appears to be making a difference in people's awareness of their bodies, of when something is wrong."

Students say they've noticed other benefits to getting connected to their bodies

"NIA helps you become aware of your own body, of what's painful versus what is pleasurable, so that you seek out pleasure," says Kim Dawson, who has been taking classes for about a year.

"There's genius in its simplicity. It's grounded in that it teaches us to move our joints the way they want to be moved, to use our bodies the way they are designed to be used," says Dawson, creative director of NIA Technique Inc., the Portland, Ore., based-NIA headquarters that trains instructors worldwide.

"Through movement, NIA helps us to find health -- physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually," Dawson says.

But there's more. NIA boosts the heart rate, enhances flexibility and coordination, and improves breathing, which can in turn improve circulation, Rosas says.

A Natural Stress-Buster

Plus, NIA is a natural stress-buster, says Deborah Kern, PhD, a NIA trainer based in Huntsville, Ala.

For her doctoral thesis in the mid-1990s, Kern followed 40 people who took NIA classes for seven weeks, along with 40 other people who did low-impact aerobics. "Joyful, peaceful, and energized emerged as the three common denominators of those in the NIA group," she says

Both groups saw cardiovascular benefits, says Kern, whose study was not published. But overall anxiety levels, as measured on a commonly used psychological scale, dropped in those who took NIA classes while increasing slightly in those who did low-impact aerobics.

The NIA technique is also being used in rehabilitation programs for cardiac patients, Rosas notes.

The adaptability of the workout to one's fitness level is a real plus, instructors add. One told WebMD of a patient in a wheelchair, while Bramlett says she teaches the mind-body fitness technique to several stroke victims. "NIA helps to improve their coordination," she says.

While no one tracks exactly how many people are taking classes, Rosas estimates the number of participants has doubled in the past three years. Meanwhile, the number of certified instructors grew from 400 in 1986 to more than 900 today, she says.

"The time is right for NIA," Rosas says. "People want to be more aware and conscious of what they are doing."

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Abdomen

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