



Hoop dreams

The simple childhood activity that boosts body and mind and is a sure-fire way to raise a smile

Spinning a hula hoop is often classed as a play activity. It conjures up images of laughing children twirling plastic hoops around their bodies, or circus performers and acrobats using them as part of their act. In fact, hula-hooping can be a fun and versatile activity for anyone, of any age – with benefits to physical, mental and emotional health.

Whether you remember the joy of hula-hooping as a child, or you're completely new to it, spinning an enormous ring around your waist can be a relatively easy skill to pick up. It's growing in popularity once again, with classes springing up in gyms and community centres, so what better time to give it a go?

Hula-hooping goes back to ancient Egyptian times, when children crafted hoops out of willow. The physical benefits are obvious. It's a low-impact exercise (so it's kinder on your joints) that works the cardiovascular system while helping to tone the core and improve balance and coordination. It's also accessible and inexpensive. A hula hoop is cheaper to buy than most gym equipment and many are lightweight and collapsible or foldable, so you can carry them around without any trouble. It's also easy to stow in an office or living room, which means you can stand up and do some hooping between phone calls or deadlines, or while watching TV or waiting for a pot to boil.

Wellbeing benefits

According to hula-hooping aficionados, there are also significant benefits to mental and emotional wellbeing. The effects of practising with a hoop range from being calming and mindful to joyful and exhilarating. Indeed, it's quite hard to spin a hula hoop without smiling – unless you're biting your lip in concentration, that is. Learning to spin a hoop, especially if you're a little rusty, can be so engaging that it can even put you into a state of flow, where you're fully present in the moment rather than thinking about the past or future. In this way, a hooping session becomes a form of moving meditation.

Caitlynd Boychuk, from Lake Louise, in Alberta, Canada, is lucky enough to live and work in a national park, surrounded by stunning scenery. She likes to take her hula hoop when she goes hiking and says hooping in the mountains makes her feel more connected to nature. 'I certainly get some funny

looks and comments from other hikers,' she laughs. 'It's not something you see every day. But for me, I get such a sense of joy and bliss when I'm hooping outdoors in the beautiful Rockies. I go into this state of flow, where I feel I'm completely at one with my hoop.'

Caitlynd, who took up the hobby as an adult after seeing some hoop performers at a music festival and going to the HoopWest convention in Calgary, posts photos of her mountain hooping sessions on Instagram. She now owns more than 40 hoops and is starting to teach others the skill. 'It's working out without feeling like you're working out,' she says. 'I love nothing more than strapping a hoop onto my rucksack, going for a hike and immersing myself in nature.'

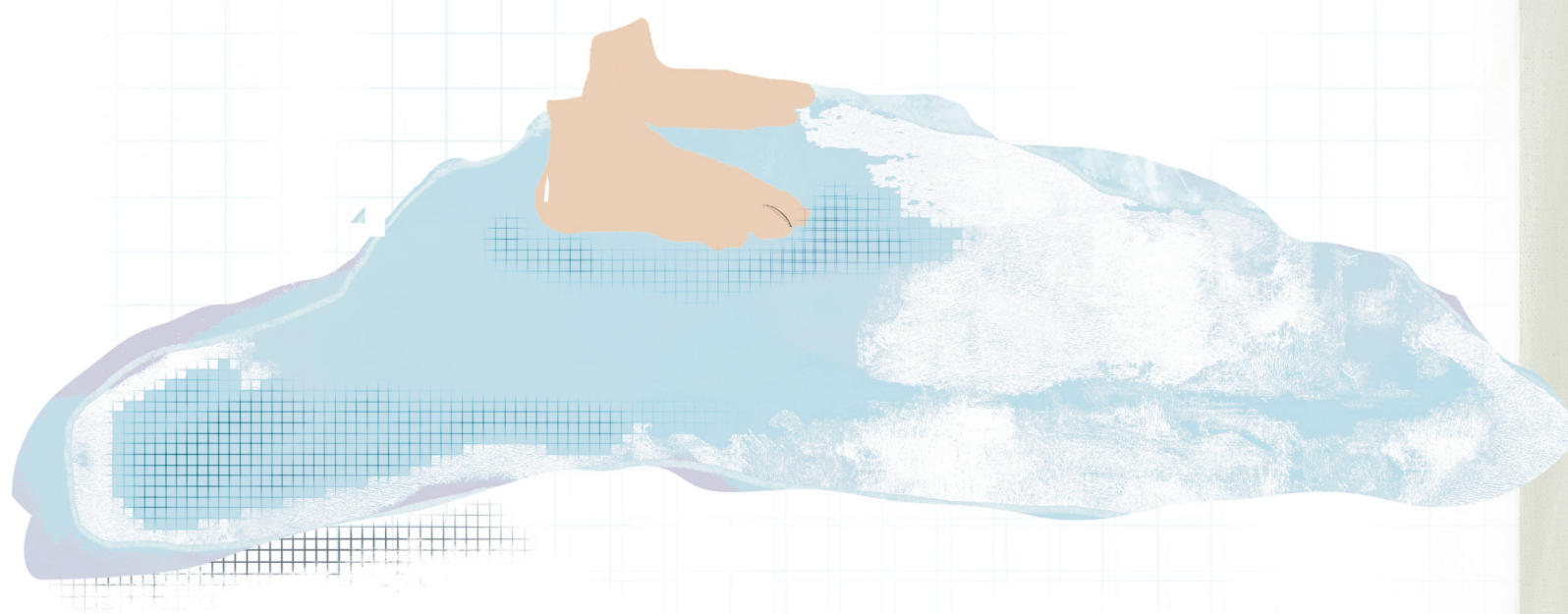
A lifelong companion

For many hula-hoop fans, interest in the activity began in childhood. Fi Hull, 34, from Belfast, Northern Ireland, turned her childhood passion for hula-hooping into her own business, Fi Flo Hoops. She graduated from university in 2014, with a degree in events management, but struggled to get a job, so ended up living back home with her parents and feeling anxious and low. Then her younger brother, Euan, came up with a novel plan to cheer her up.

'He found two old children's hula hoops in our parents' garage and turned them into one big, adult-size hoop,' says Fi. 'I spent days out in the garden practising. I have a medical condition called dyspraxia, which affects my coordination, so I had to relearn the basics, but it turned out to be really good for me and it lifted my mood, too. I found an online hooping community and started learning tricks.'

Fi experienced such a lift in her mental health from hooping that she started to wonder whether she could use it to help others. She began teaching hula-hoop sessions to nurses at her local hospital, then designed an exercise programme and started running corporate events and community, group and one-to-one sessions.

One of the big draws of hula-hooping is the thrill of mastering a new skill and getting a little better each time. Professional hula-hoop artist Supriya Srivastav, from



'We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing'

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Bengaluru, India, says she started playing with a hoop as a personal challenge and soon found herself looking forward to coming home from work each day and picking it up. 'I started enjoying it so much that my 10 minutes of practice would turn into two hours without me even realising,' she says. 'I clearly remember the day when I was sweating and feeling so light and happy in my body, despite some challenges in my professional and personal life at the time.'

For Supriya – who now runs Hoop with Supriya – and many others like her, hula-hooping has become a form of active meditation. She says she found 'hope in the hoop' by being patient as she was teaching herself, and feeling elation and joy whenever she got it right. 'When you're hula-hooping, your attention is on the hoop – in this state of mind, you can't think about doing anything else,' she says. 'You're observing what's happening in your body, making corrections and going past what you think are your limitations. It becomes like a meditative state, which can be really useful for those people who struggle to sit still and meditate. It brings the same kind of peace, and you're trying to do it on your own, at your own pace.'

No age limit

Hula-hooping seems to have a universal appeal, and many hobby-hoopers speak of the smile it brings to the faces of other people who see them spinning a hoop. It can be as mesmerising to watch the activity as to take part. Clara Jobs, from Bonn, Germany, says she feels strongly drawn to the hoop. 'You see a hoop sitting in a corner and it looks inviting,' she says. 'It's almost calling to you, saying: "Pick me up and do something with me." It wants to be played with.' Clara also runs hooping classes and says her oldest participant is in her 70s. 'It's so accessible, because there are many hoop sizes and weights, and many ways to spin a hoop,' she says. 'You don't even have to use your waist, you can spin it round your chest or an arm.'

Clara says many of her clients have experienced huge improvements in their self-esteem and confidence from hooping. 'They come to their first class and they're body-conscious and can't imagine moving their hips like that,' she says. 'But by the end, they're laughing and dancing and moving without inhibition. They say it really boosts self-confidence.'

Stress-reliever

But for many hoopers, one of the most important elements of the hobby is having fun. Abby Close, from Suffolk, England, began hula-hooping when she was 12. She took her hoop to university and continued using it during her corporate career, to help lower her stress levels. Last year she launched her own business, Hula with Abs, teaching hula fitness classes online and in person to adults and schoolchildren.

'Hula-hooping is brilliant for releasing anxiety, because it's so much fun,' she says. 'When I look around the room at my clients hooping, I can see huge smiles on everyone's faces. It's addictive, too – when you drop that hoop you want to pick it back up again and have another go.'

Abby likes to play some 'cheesy pop tunes' when she uses her hoop. 'I'm not a gym person and I hated PE at school, but for me, hula-hooping doesn't even feel like exercise. You just get into the flow. 'If you're struggling to get the hang of it, my advice is to stop overthinking it and just enjoy yourself. You could even try closing your eyes to get yourself into the zone. And, of course,' she adds, 'allow yourself to smile.'

Words: **Jade Beecroft**

For more information, visit hoopwithsupriya.com, fiflohoops.com and hulawithabs.co.uk, and check Instagram for [@caity.hoops](https://www.instagram.com/caity.hoops) and [@clara_hoops](https://www.instagram.com/clara_hoops).



ILLUSTRATIONS: JENNY BOOTH