

Yoga at Home

by Eva Herriott

What to practice

Getting Started

Don't Lose the Juice

Creating--and maintaining--a regular personal practice is a key aspect to tapping into the long-term benefits of yoga. At any age, a person can begin (or recommit to) taking time each day for on-the-mat yoga practice. Luckily, one of the most common effects of yoga is that it makes you want to practice more. In this piece, health educator and writer Eva Herriott shares thoughts and tips on practicing yoga at home.



Consider making it a goal to enjoy the calming and energizing effects of yoga every day by practicing in the comfort of your own home.

“It’s in your home practice that the real, essential change takes place,” says Rodney Yee, a regular Kripalu presenter, author of *Yoga: The Poetry of the Body*, and creator of numerous instructional yoga DVDs and videos. “Going to classes and getting the support of a community of like-minded people practicing yoga is very important, of course. But home practice is vital if you want to deepen your practice. It sets the stage for the deep insights and profound transformation of mind and body that are the real benefits of yoga.”

In addition to an immediate sense of well-being, yoga facilitates change. Regular practice can help you drop negative lifestyle habits and inspire you to take on healthier ones. It can also bring a renewal of confidence, courage, and trust in yourself and the world. Ultimately, a personal practice provides time to go within to find and express one’s natural, divine self.

In the beginning, it takes attention and commitment to make a new practice part of your daily life. However, as you feel better and better about the results, your priorities will naturally adjust to make space for it. Whether it’s three, five, or seven days a week, once you have established your routine, it becomes a part of who you are and how you live.

The nervous system adapts to regular routines, and once the habit is established, your body signals will help prompt you to step onto your mat. The goal is to get to the point at which not doing yoga would be like not brushing your teeth. Regularity of practice, according to Rodney, is not just the key to establishing a habit, it also opens you to the deeper insights that yoga can provide.

“Every so often when you practice, you get divine flashes of knowledge,” Rodney says. “You are a farmer, and you don’t know when the rain is going to come; you just till the soil and wait. You don’t know when divine knowledge is going to come to you; you just come to your mat and practice every day. But don’t be too serious about it, because if you are too serious you will miss the wisdom that is coming in.”

What to practice

Most people, including experienced practitioners of yoga, find it useful to alternate between home practice and yoga classes, which offer the benefits of instruction combined with the amazing feeling of doing yoga in a group. Ideally, you can create a foundational sequence of poses and breathing practices from what you learn and experience with a teacher. Some styles of yoga recommend a particular series and method of practice.

While there is a good deal of variety, most people begin their practice by taking a moment or two to settle in, often with a few conscious breaths. In general, a well-rounded practice includes at least one or two of each of the following: standing poses, back bends, twists, hip openers, forward bends, and restorative poses. One guideline is to think about whether you are flexing and stretching your spine in as many directions as possible. And don’t underestimate the importance of shavasana, the 5 to 15 minutes of deep relaxation at the end of your practice. Although it may not feel like you are doing anything, this is actually the most important pose of all.

"The deep relaxation at the end of your practice is vital, because it allows your awareness to focus on the effects of the practice and to integrate its results," says Don Stapleton, Dean of Yoga Education at Kripalu and author of *Self-Awakening Yoga: The Expansion of Consciousness Through the Body's Own Wisdom*. "If you just jump up and run out the door, it's almost like it didn't even happen. The more you stay present to receive the effects of the postures, both after each posture and at the end of your practice, the more the effects stay with you throughout the day and throughout your life."

Getting Started

If you are new to yoga, it's a good idea to take several yoga classes so you know a number of basic poses well enough to practice them safely and enjoyably at home. Other people like to get started with DVDs, videos, or books, and these can be helpful in teaching a foundational yoga practice. If you already know a little, what are you waiting for? You'd be surprised how much you already know. Take the leap!

Start small. Set moderate, realistic goals for yourself. A good place to start is with 30 minutes a day, gradually working your way up to an hour. If that seems like too much, start smaller. Even 15 to 20 minutes a day will be enough to experience benefits (even 5 minutes--and you can do anything for 5 minutes!). It's the quality of the time, not the quantity.

When to practice. Whenever possible, settle on a fixed time of day, so you don't have to constantly plan your day to find time for your yoga practice. Some people find it easiest to practice just before going to bed, when the house is quiet and the responsibilities of the day are behind them. Some people practice first thing in the morning, or they never get around to it. Before dinner is another popular time. Figure out what works for you. On days when you have less time than usual, try a shorter session, or just take 5 minutes to sit and breathe.

Where to practice. Living rooms, bedrooms, studies--any room can become a yoga sanctuary. Roll out your mat or spread your blanket and voilà. Choose a place that gives you as much privacy as possible--and definitely don't answer the phone! Alert those you live with that this is time just for you. Your yoga spot will become a sanctuary that you want to return to.

What to do if you miss a day or two. Don't be hard on yourself or give up altogether. Take a breath, recommit, and start back up again. You may need extra support at first; set up a yoga buddy or teacher you can check in or practice with. Listen to your body (it wants to practice!) and keep your eye on the goal. Eventually, you'll miss it on days when you can't practice.

Don't Lose the Juice

If you have a regular yoga practice, but have gotten uninspired, the following tips can help you revitalize:

Make it enticing. Even experienced practitioners of yoga find that more often than not they have to overcome some initial resistance or inertia to get started. "Start with poses you like, so there's not so much resistance," says Rodney, "Coax yourself gently into practice. Get to the mat and do something you love." Then, as your body warms up, gradually work your way towards more physically demanding and challenging poses.

Create variety. Listen to your body and be attentive to its needs. Sometimes your body needs a quiet, restorative practice and at other times, something more dynamic and vigorous. On a particular day, you may decide to focus on specific groups of poses, a specific part of the body, or a specific "weak link" you'd like to work on.

Enjoy the feelings in your body. "Staying present to the sensations created by each posture is the most important part of your yoga practice," says Don Stapleton. "Our inner wisdom communicates to us through sensations. When you focus awareness on the sensations created by each posture, you are actually enhancing the sensations and improving their efficiency. In this way, you establish a communication link to your inner wisdom, which is the ultimate purpose of a yoga practice."

Eva Herriott, PhD, is a health educator and writer who specializes in natural health and the therapeutic applications of yoga.

Source: Kripalu Online 2007