

Yoga HOME PRACTICE

your questions answered



Charlotte Watts, Yoga Teacher and Nutritional Therapist for Positively Slim, offers her advice on going it alone

Yoga self-practice is not just second best to attending a class. With good grounding and awareness, it is the path to a truly internal and connected relationship with yoga. It offers the opportunity to connect with how you feel and what your body needs at any given moment. But starting from the beginning can be daunting and needs some basic instruction. Here are common initial concerns about starting your yoga journey:

There seem to be a lot of yoga styles, how do I know which to choose?

Yoga is yoga. If you attend a few different classes, you will soon see that, although some are more flowing and some more still, postures (asanas) are the same and a focus on breath, body awareness and release are common themes throughout. Look for the style that most helps you to find stillness and doesn't simply feed your ambition to stretch further. Find a teacher who can help you connect with your breath and the rest will follow.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO YOGA STYLES

ASTANGA VINYASA, VINYASA FLOW AND JIVAMUKTI are examples of more dynamic practices that move quickly between different poses.

HATHA AND VINIYOGA can also have some flow and include sun salutations, but may practise poses in a more gentle and meditative way.

LYENGAR has an emphasis on alignment and holding poses for longer to explore how we can open up within them. I'd advise this practice as a means to inform good alignment in other forms you might try.

How do I decide what to practise at home – there seems to be a set structure to classes?

Again, let books and your yoga teacher give you a guide to starter yoga sequences. Whatever the school, all yoga sequencing begins with loosening the hips and the spine so that stronger poses can be done safely, without tension. Then poses such as deeper forward bends will come from movement in the hips, and back bends in the upper, not lower, spine. If your lower back feels pinched or tense in these or standing poses, it is better to pull back and concentrate on how you support the lower back with good abdominal tone whilst still being able to breathe into the belly. Core strength, makes for a happy spine.

A full yoga sequence will include at least one seated and lying pose, twists, standing poses, balances, forward bends, back bends, inversions and savasana or 'corpse pose' – the final relaxation. They don't necessarily need to be in that order, for example, you might start with a loosening lying or sitting twist, practise a stronger standing twist later, and/or finish with a deeper lying or sitting twist. Not every single short session will necessarily include all of these, but they should all be part of a regular practice.

How frequently can I practise yoga safely?

Daily; it is better to practise little and often rather than just attending one or two long classes a week. You can build up a mindful practice with 20 minutes a day if that's what you have. Just vary what you do to cover all ways of moving the body, and don't assume you'll always need the same thing every day. Sometimes a stronger practice is what you need, and sometimes you might feel that one restorative pose for 20 minutes is the stillness that your body responds to best.

I'd love to start doing yoga but I'm too self-conscious to go to a group. What book would you advise for beginners?

Books are a good way to start as you can read about the finer details and mindset to adopt before starting your practice. However, I advise attending at least some classes to get the feel of poses and how to move into them. Beginners' courses are the best way to start so you get an idea of how you might modify postures to suit your needs. Everyone there is in the same boat and you will soon see the emphasis is away from any sense of competition. Quite the opposite; yoga is an internal practice and you will be guided away from comparison with others.

Use these books as a reminder of points learnt in yoga class:

B.K.S Iyengar – *Yoga the Path to Holistic Health*

■ This is a great all-encompassing guide to the asanas from the master of alignment; includes a good grounding in yoga philosophy and lots of handy practice sequences at the back.

T.K.V. Desikachar – *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*

■ A useful book from another master, this classic describes simple anatomical considerations for putting sequences together and is good for the beginner as it shows how to ease the body open.

Donna Farhi – *Yoga Mind, Body and Spirit: A Return to Wholeness*

■ A beautiful and instructive book, imbuing postures with a sense of yoga philosophy, whilst showing readers how to move correctly into postures.



Charlotte practises as a Nutritional Therapist and Yoga Teacher in Brighton, see www.charlottewattshealth.com/yoga and www.vajrasatiyoga.co.uk

