

When people start practicing yoga, there's often a phase at the beginning where they're practicing 3-5 times per week. They're in love with the newness, the new feeling of lightness in their body and maybe even some weight loss. But after some period of time, they may shift into a new routine of less frequency. How often is effective for yoga to have a positive impact?

Well, the answer is: it depends. It depends on what your goals are (remembering, of course, that your practice is really supposed to be without goals), the style of yoga you're practicing, your diet, other kinds of exercise you might be doing, any history of injury; this list is rather endless. So, what approach should you take?

Let's go through this list one by one:

What are your goals for yoga?

Goals could include things like increasing flexibility, improving posture, building strength, relieving stress, losing weight or any combination of these factors. Increasing flexibility is a direct function of how often you attend and what you do when you're off the mat. You could go to yoga every day but if you're sitting for 8 hours a day, running 5 times a week as well as weight training, it's really hard to stay flexible. So, to increase flexibility, more is usually better. Losing weight is a function of not just how often you practice but what you're eating and how cardiovascular your practice is (or you can supplement your practice with another activity that's purely cardiovascular, like running). While all yoga styles emphasize deep breathing and have a relaxing affect on the nervous system, practicing meditation and regular restorative yoga classes is a wonderful way to focus on decreasing stress.

What style of yoga are you practicing?

The style of yoga you're practicing will result in different effects on the body. Heated power yoga styles can increase flexibility and also may result in weight loss due to the cardiovascular nature of the practice. Restorative yoga or Hatha classes may increase flexibility and also aid in stress reduction (although, as stated, ALL styles of yoga will help with that). Unheated vinyasa flow classes will increase flexibility and power classes will help build strength. Having said that, ALL classes will aid in ALL of the benefits described above; in many cases, it's a matter of finding a class, teacher and style that allows you to see the desired effect on the body.

What are you eating?

Sometimes when people come to yoga, they're interested in losing weight and improving health. But yoga is not a magic bullet. Without looking at all the factors that impact your health (diet, stress level, exercise routine, etc.) and making positive changes in all areas, it's hard to see the results you want. One of the wonderful things about yoga is that once you start to practice regularly, you'll notice the effects of food and how eating different things can affect you physically. You'll make better connections between picking up that unhealthy snack run and how light you'll feel when making a better choice. You'll savor sweet treats more, knowing that you're taking good care of yourself overall.

What other kinds of exercise are you doing?

I get a number of referrals from athletes (runners and cyclists) and bodybuilders frustrated by the lack of flexibility their primary sport is generating in their body. I had a student ask me why she was so sore after yoga and when I asked her what else she was doing for exercise, she said she was doing an online "Insanity" workout 6 days a week (in addition to yoga!) If you're looking for certain results or are experiencing certain sensations in the body, look at what else you're doing and see if there's a connection.

History of Injury:

A history of injury can affect the way yoga impacts your body and your ability to experience the kinds of results you want. If you've built up a lot of scar tissue and stiff muscles over years of holding your body in a particular way post-injury, you will need to modify poses and look for specific poses that stretch those parts of the body. If you've been injured and avoid using a particular part of the body, you may have developed a muscular imbalance that you feel when in certain poses. None of these things or any injury will prevent you from experiencing the value of yoga; it just may mean you need to do certain things more than others and practice more (or less) regularly.

So, now that we've covered some of the overall factors to consider, here are some general guidelines.

Disclaimer: *as with all guidelines, they are generally applicable and may require further customization to help you get the results you want.*

For weight loss, increased flexibility, strength building and stress relief:

Yoga 3 times per week, cardiovascular exercise 2-3 times per week, healthy diet.

To jump start a program of increased flexibility, strength building and stress relief: Heated power yoga, 5 times per week, restorative class once per week, one day of rest. Continue for 30 days. Assess results. Continue if desired or decrease yoga to 3-4 times per week.

To build strength after injury, stretch muscles weak from lack of use: 3 private sessions with a goal of learning how to modify poses for greater accessibility as well as identifying poses that will strengthen and stretch the injured areas. Work with private teacher to find local classes that would be appropriate. Start with twice weekly yoga, assess results on the body and as long as there are no negative results, increase as tolerated.

To build flexibility while continuing with aggressive weight lifting/running/cycling: At least 1 class per week focused on general stretching (heated or unheated power classes work well as the poses mimic functional movement and joints are worked along their regular range of motion) and an insertion before or after regular exercise of at least 5 poses that focus on hip extension, shoulder opening, lower back stretching and hamstring lengthening. If more than 1 class per week can be completed, even better but in the case of these kinds of students, exercise time is usually pretty extensive as it is.

Overall, practicing 3 times per week is ideal but remember: a little bit of yoga every day is better than a lot of yoga once or twice per week. If all you can do is 15 minutes per day, do that. The best guide you have to what you need is to spend at least 5 minutes per day seated in quiet. Close your eyes take a few deep breaths and notice the effects of your life on your body. Listen for the intuitive messages that arise and follow those. All the guidelines in the world won't replace what you most likely already know.

Namaste.