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Irish Examiner

Circulation: 37009
 Readership: 74018
 Display Rate (£/cm²): 9.91

26 JUL 2019

A837

A healthy life is about balance

Ayurvedic practitioner Sarah Kucera lives according to the daily, nightly, and seasonal rituals espoused by the traditional Indian philosophy, says **Helen O'Callaghan**

IT'S nearly 8am in Missouri and Sarah Kucera's morning has been proceeding as it always does.

"My mornings are almost always the same," says the chiropractor, yoga teacher, Ayurvedic practitioner, and author of *The Ayurvedic Self-Care Handbook, Holistic Healing Rituals for Every Day and Season*. "I woke up and took five minutes sitting in bed before getting out. Then, I used my tongue-cleaner. I sprayed rosewater on my face. I drank warm water and went for a walk."

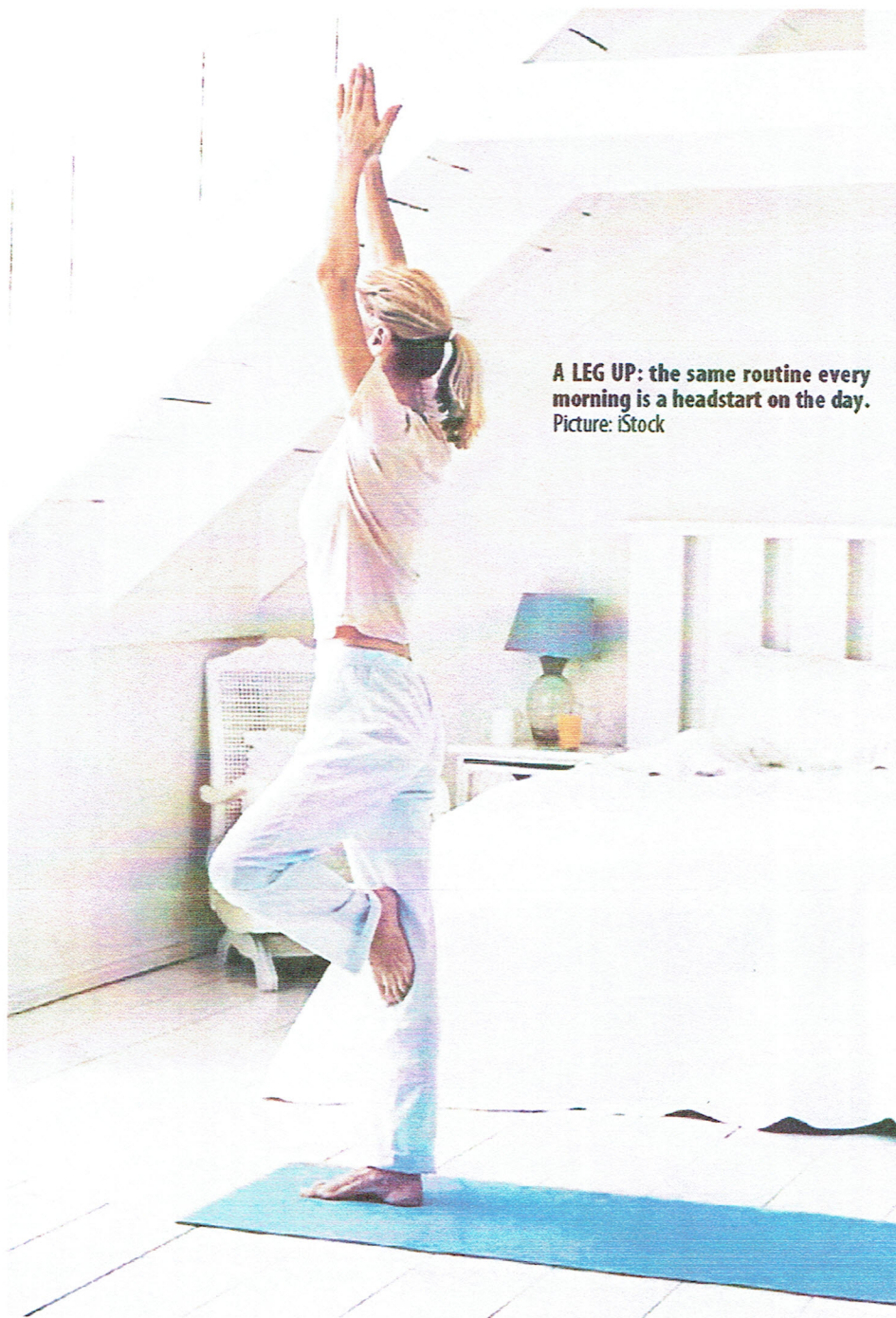
Kucera lives "downtown", so her walks are urban. It was about 6.15am and few people were out. "It's really nice to have alone time in a city. It feels like it's mine; there's this feeling of control. Businesses are closed and there's an energy that feels really calm, but there's a potential in it and that feels good."

These morning rituals are what Kucera calls her non-negotiables. Growing up in Iowa, Kucera's life was predictable: home-cooked meals from her grandparents' farm, outdoor play, biking in summer, sledding in winter. Daily activities and meals, cued by seasonal changes, kept her family healthy and warmed their home-life. It created her passion for routines and rituals, which, as an Ayurvedic practitioner, she has built her career on. "Nature is methodical and gives us all [our] important cues for health and balance, when to rise and sleep, when to eat and move," she says in her book.

Ayurveda, an ancient tradition that originated in India, is based on daily, nightly, and seasonal routines. Kucera explains its teaching: people exist on a continuum with nature and we should honour this through the foods we eat, how we conduct our day, and by absorbing our changing environment through our senses. Nature is cyclical, she says, and when our lives flow in sync with it, we feel well. "When life causes us to veer off track, we experience imbalance."

Kucera's book details rituals for an "intentional" start to your day. This means rising before/with the sun (puts you on track to get things moving and is the most natural time of day for elimination from bowels and bladder), meditating (mindful stillness comes to us most easily in the morning), cleaning/scraping your tongue (the tongue's a big indicator of digestive health, so look for a coating, e.g. a layer across the back of your tongue indicates waste hiding in your colon).

While the daily/seasonal rituals should each take just 10 minutes or less, most people would find it hard to do the dozen before breakfast, which Kucera says should be eaten by 9am. After the tongue-scraping, for example, there's rinsing your nasal passages with a neti pot (improves overall respiratory health, but "a little uncomfortable, until you've got used to it"), swishing oil in your mouth (strengthens facial muscles, provides maximum taste in food, and prevents dryness of lips/mouth/throat), and dry-brushing your body (has a profound effect on lymphatic system, an important



A LEG UP: the same routine every morning is a headstart on the day.
Picture: iStock

part of our immunity).

But there's the ideal and there's what's possible. Are there any "half measures" that also work wonders? "Even if you're a busy mum or entrepreneur, you can still wake up at the same time and do three simple things consistently," says Kucera. "Sit up in bed and take a minute to do a breathing practice, meditate or pray — so you're recognising the beginning of your day — do your tongue-cleaning and drink warm water. These could all be done in five minutes."

She recommends rituals with crossover benefits for physical, mental, and emotional/spiritual wellbeing. "Using a tongue-cleaner is a way of seeing how your body's processing, not just food but your thoughts and emotions. Ayurvedic practice views digestion as everything we take in. And drinking a cup of warm water, before you eat, will hydrate, but also stimulate, the digestive tract, setting up the organs and internal body for what you're going to be taking in, so as to absorb nutrients and use them properly for energy."

From yogic breathing (boosts energy) and grounding meditations (for overcoming transitions) to personalised yoga postures (for physical/emotional stress) and nourish-

ing tonics and teas (prevents/treats disease), *The Ayurvedic Self-Care Handbook* helps you rediscover your potential to feel good. Kucera's book also explains the five elements (bhutas), 10 pairs of elemental qualities (gunas), and three natural constitutions (doshas) of Ayurveda. Studying these, she says, helps people get a fuller understanding of their body. The three doshas — Vata, Pitta, and Kapha — are all within us, though aspects within each will resonate more with us.

Our bodies indicate when we need to do more for our health, says Kucera, who recommends looking for pointers, firstly at our digestion, sleep, skin, physical, and mental energy:

■ **Digestion:** Healthy elimination means a bowel movement every day, one to two times per day; bloating/burping/gas/hyperacidity/stomach pains are common, but not normal/healthy.

■ **Sleep:** You should fall asleep within 10 minutes of going to bed and stay asleep until the alarm goes off the next morning.

■ **Skin:** Should have even tone, be blemish-free, feel naturally

The three doshas at a glance

The three doshas are all within us, though aspects of each will resonate more:

■ **Vata** governs nervous system, hearing, elimination and all movement in the body — including movement at our joints and circulation of blood and lymph.

Physically, Vata has lean/sinewy muscles and delicate facial features.

Those with higher Vata percentage get cold easily and frequently experience dryness, e.g. in skin/eyes.

Psychological traits include creativity and spontaneity but there can also be heightened emotions, e.g. fear, indecision, worry.

■ **Pitta**, made of fire and water, watches over our ability to transform and governs our hormones, enzymes, digestion, blood, skin and eyes.

Physically, it's linked with average-sized stature.

Mentally, Pittas are thinkers, problem-solvers, goal-setters and leaders. Their intensity can also cause them to become easily frustrated, angry or irritable.

■ **Kapha** is in charge of respiratory system, heart, immunity, mucous membranes cartilage and synovial fluid (lubricates joints).

Kaphas are sturdy with bigger bones and bulkier muscles. They appreciate stability and are non-confrontational. They can also tend towards depression, sluggishness and feeling stuck. Kaphas are usually in nurturing, supportive roles, e.g. caregivers, teachers, nurses or social workers.

hydrated, and have healthy elasticity.

■ **Physical energy:** Should be steady, so you feel able to complete desired tasks; natural decrease occurs at 7pm/8pm, but until then you shouldn't feel listless/restless.

■ **Mental energy:** Enough to process thoughts, have intelligent discussions, and make sound decisions; you should be able to think/communicate without it feeling like strain/effort; reactions/responses to stress should be proportionate to stressors.

Kucera sees technology divorcing us from natural rhythms and knowledge, and thereby impacting on health. "It's enabling us to never turn off our working brain.

We're constantly on: I can work from anywhere, anytime, and because I can, I will, or other people assume I will, so I'll be contacted." Technology also means we don't have to go out into the world to "see" things.

"We look at nature on a screen; we don't immerse ourselves in it. Our weather app means we don't have to go outside, look at the sky, and wonder if it's going to rain today. It's all muting our senses, yet our senses are important for health. They're what inform us: Am I feeling good? Do I need to be having a different food? Does this food work for me?"

And while devices like health trackers (fitness/sleep) are "good for making people aware and awareness is never bad," Kucera finds people can stop at the tracker. "We must look inward: we need to know what not having sleep feels like. How is my mind working today? How do I operate on diminished sleep? We can't just keep looking outward at external data."

■ *The Ayurvedic Self-Care Handbook*, Sarah Kucera, €18.19.

