

## Our four-page guide to what yoga can do for you

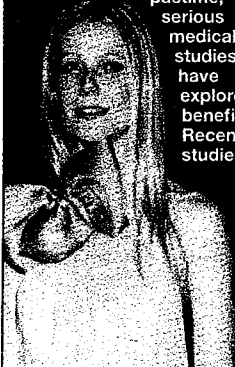
### LISA SCOTT takes a new look at an old tradition

If you're tired of hearing about yoga, you're probably not alone. In recent years we've had it shoved down our throats thanks to the popularity of sinewy devotees such as Madonna, Gwynnie (pictured below) and Geri.

The fitness industry is saturated with airy, white-washed yoga studios, yoga holidays and even classes for children and babies. The latest trend is face yoga: specific exercises formulated to tone muscles and combat wrinkles with relaxation and tension reduction. Needless to say, you look a bit daft doing it.

But while we've been reading about celebs and their

favourite fitness pastime, serious medical studies have explored its benefits. Recent studies in



Sweden and India reveal that yoga can reverse biochemical changes associated with high blood pressure, obesity and high blood sugar. Reversing a heart disease factor is big news in Britain - weak hearts are one of our greatest health concerns.

Last summer, researchers in India also discovered that migraine sufferers who practised pranayama (breath control) and yoga saw the frequency and intensity of their headaches diminish. Along with tiredness, headaches are among the most common complaints heard by British GPs.

One person who has long known about the scientific powers of yoga is research scientist Dr Robin Munro, of London's Yoga Therapy Centre. He trained as a biochemist in the 1970s, spending time in medical schools in New York and Cambridge. He suffered from asthma for most his life until he met an Indian doctor who introduced him to yoga therapy, which is where yoga

practices are tailored for the individual. 'He taught me how to do certain postures and use breathing to control my asthma. Within three years, it appeared to have gone. That was 30 years ago.'

Munro was so impressed with the phenomenon that he gave up his biochemistry career to set up the Yoga

Biomedical Trust in 1983. 'It was a bad move professionally but I was very interested in finding alternatives to surgery and drugs.'

Today, Munro treats a variety of ailments but he specialises in bad backs. His belief in the benefits of tailored yoga routines recently was supported by ground-breaking research led by Dr Karen Sherman, who found that the more vigorous types of yoga, such as ashtanga, can exacerbate back problems. And a team of yoga teachers and British academics led by Prof David J Torgerson of York University are running a huge trial on how yoga can treat back pain.

Heavyweight illnesses such as cancer and MS may also benefit. 'We can't cure these conditions but we can help people cope with the side effects,' Munro explains. 'Chronic fatigue is a common complaint of cancer sufferers and the people who come to our cancer-specific classes say yoga really does help them. The postures energise

them and the breathing exercises help them cope with pain control. We also help people with multiple sclerosis control their muscles and use them better.'

Laura Bissell, founding director of the Yorkshire Yoga & Therapy Centre, recently ran her own clinical trial on yoga's effects on weight loss. The participants were counselled on healthy eating and followed a tailored yoga plan. Forty people lost a total of 119kg.

Bissell hopes that these results will encourage the Government to invest more money in trials.

'Yoga could have a beneficial impact on the physical and mental health of our nation, yet most policy makers mistakenly identify yoga as an exotic practice suitable only for people who are already fit and flexible. They do not understand that yoga is a beneficial therapy for everyone.'

If these trials continue, who knows what the future will hold? PE lessons may never be the same again.

# Heart of the matter

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