

## I relax with...

### ...chanting yoga

I have been practising chanting yoga for 25 years, and it brings me complete peace, vitality and health. Best of all, it gives me a stress-free state of mind.

I grew up in the vedic philosophy, a predecessor of Hinduism. I learned yoga, pranayam breathing, meditation and ayurvedic medicine, the traditional Indian system of holistic and preventive medicine that treats illness by helping a person reach a balanced state of inner harmony and natural well-being.

Having also studied Western medicine, as a GP, I have a holistic approach to my patients. I feel contented, happy, and completely blissful as a result of my practice. I need only three to four hours sleep most nights. I take no alcohol, coffee or tea, and I feel charged and able to take on plenty of work, as if I have 48 hours available instead of 24 each day.

Chanting yoga is based on the principle of vibrational

medicine and involves the primordial sound vibration of mantras. Much of the popular yoga practiced in the West is about posture, which is only one of the eight limbs of yoga. In chanting yoga, we use mantra meditation as a sublime process for deep relaxation, achieving greater concentration and transformation of consciousness to a higher level.

This form of yoga is considered the most appropriate for a modern hectic life, and I recommend it to some patients as complementary treatment for anxiety, panic attacks, depression, insomnia, asthma and other chronic disorders. Many have found this approach helpful.

I have also been teaching colleagues and friends who find it a great stress buster. They tell me that, after a few sessions, they experience a sense of control in their lives.

● Dr Juhi Gautam is a GP in London  
● For information on seminars: [www.chantingyoga.com](http://www.chantingyoga.com)



Despite living what doctors described as a 'virtuous life', Claudia Zeff was at risk of heart disease. A genetic predisposition to high blood pressure meant she faced a lifetime of medication and the risk of health problems in later life, including stroke and kidney damage.

Indeed, although she was put on blood pressure drugs two years ago, a recent scan had showed one of the walls in her heart was beginning to thicken - a worrying sign.

'I knew that could be hugely problematic as I got older and that motivated me to do something about it,' says the 54-year-old.

What Ms Zeff did is sign up to a pioneering programme run by a cardiologist where meditation and chanting are used to combat high blood pressure. Amazingly, she is not only now medication-free, but her damaged heart had repaired itself.

The benefits of yoga have long been recognised in the East, but in the West elements of the discipline - such as chanting mantras and deep breathing - have been viewed with scepticism.

However, there is growing scientific study to show that meditation may be a powerful tool against a range of health problems. It's thought the calm state reached through yoga makes the brain subconsciously alter the sympathetic nervous system - the part of the body that responds to stress. As a result heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure are all lowered.

One of the biggest studies of its kind, presented to the American Heart Association last year, found patients with coronary heart disease who practised meditation and chanting had nearly 50 per cent lower rates of heart attack, stroke and death compared to non-meditating subjects.

The nine-year trial followed the men and women with narrowed arteries in their hearts. The patients were randomly assigned to either practise meditation or to participate in a control group which had health education classes in traditional risk factors, including diet and exercise.

Another study last year of students at Georgetown University found that chanting helped lower blood pressure after three months of regular practice.

When her blood pressure reached the high level of 156/105 two years ago, Ms Zeff, who heads an arts charity, was told she would need to take medication for the rest of her life.

'My mother suffers high blood pressure and I have inherited it,' she says. 'Seeing the problems it causes her - such as hardening of the arteries and the risk of angina and kidney disease - prompted me to see if I could stop it getting worse. I also didn't want to be on increasing medication for the rest of my life.'

She consulted private cardiologist Dr Richard Carroll, who told her about a programme he was running. Dr Carroll had teamed up with a colleague, London GP and yoga expert Dr Juhi Gautam, to offer a drug-free way to tackle hypertension.

Dr Carroll sees increasing numbers of patients who do not want to take daily medication for the rest of their lives. 'With meditation, the benefits are maintained for long periods afterwards, and increasingly so the more you meditate,' he says.

He identified suitable cardiology patients - those with genetic hypertension and not hypertension caused by lifestyle - and gave them the option of trying to come off or reduce medication using an intensive yoga programme. This focuses on the meditative element of yoga rather than the bending or stretching.

'I was sceptical about the chanting,' admits Ms Zeff. 'But at that point I was taking 12mg daily doses of pills, Amias and Natrilix, and I did not want to be taking them for the rest of my life. I knew Dr Gautam had a grounding in Western medicine and decided to give it a try.'

'Initially, we concentrated on simple meditative breathing that involves alternating breaths between nostrils using the fingers to close each nostril in time with inhalations and exhalations.

'Then she introduced the chanting element and let me choose a mantra. Dr Gautam was very good at making me feel comfortable about this.'

Ms Zeff underwent 12 weekly two-hour sessions of intense yoga meditation, learning the methods of pranayam yoga - a form of yoga dedicated to meditation.

After less than a month her blood pressure had started to reduce and it is now 107/83 down from 156/105. Since March last year she has come off both her medications. Regular scans show the thickness of the damaged heart wall is now back to normal.

She sees Dr Gautam once every few months and meditates on her own daily.

'It has made a massive difference,' she said. 'It is the difference between being healthy and being unhealthy. I allow myself 20 minutes each morning to go through them and I will do it for ever.'

The scheme is a UK first and the long-term benefits have yet to be ascertained. It is only available privately and the session with Dr Gautam costs between £120 and £250.

And despite the research, some experts are still unsure of the long-term benefits of meditation on blood pressure. Fotini Rozakeas, cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, advises that it should be used to complement medication, not replace it.

She said: 'It is known that regular physical exercise can help to lower blood pressure and that relaxation techniques can also improve it in the short term. However, there is no evidence that meditation is a suitable alternative to medication for people with high blood pressure.'

But as far as Ms Zeff is concerned, yoga has meant freedom from a lifetime of pills.

She said: 'Hopefully the results I've experienced will now mean I can avoid medication and the impact high blood pressure would have had on my life as I got older.'

● For further information: [www.portobelloclinic.com](http://www.portobelloclinic.com).



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**Convert: Claudia Zeff, who faced a lifetime of medication**

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**Meditation, not medication: The calm state reached through yoga lowers heart rate, breathing and blood pressure**