



## GOING UP: ANIMAL

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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Do you feel the pain?

A new book claims that far from being good for you, yoga can cause serious damage. Style reports on a row that has set the fitness community alight

*Peta Bee* Published: 29 January 2012



That position looks like it really hurts: does it?

To its millions of devotees, yoga is a panacea for modern living, unrivalled in its ability to cure, energise and strengthen the body while calming the mind. A rolled-up yoga mat tucked under the arm has become a trademark of those who seek something deeper from a workout than mere calorie-burning and sweat, and who inhabit a world peopled by A-listers such as Madonna and Christy Turlington, all searching for a better-functioning and better-looking body. To suggest that yoga has the capacity to harm seems at odds with its serene reputation, yet it is precisely such claims that have caused the controlled breathing of yoga enthusiasts everywhere to become more erratic.

More than any other activity, yoga now divides the fitness industry into those who think it is essential for a supple and healthy body, and those who think it is of little use at all and may even be dangerous. A book due out next week (February 7) by William J Broad, the New York Times senior science writer, has sent ripples of discord throughout the yoga world. In *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, Broad examines the potential dangers and startling injury tally of the world's most popular flexibility regimen.

He is not the first to cast doubt on the ancient discipline. Matt Roberts, the celebrity trainer who counts the Camerons among his clients, has slammed it as a waste of time on the fitness front, citing studies that show a 50-minute class burns 144 calories, no better than heading out for a gentle stroll. "You may feel that you are keeping fit by doing a weekly yoga class, but you aren't," he says. "The reason everyone likes yoga is that it isn't very hard."

And David Higgins, a sports scientist at the prestigious Australian Institute of Sport and now director of the TenPilates studios in London, where he trains Claudia Schiffer and Laura Bailey, says it can cause "terrible problems" and that "yoga provides me with most of my clients, as people come to get help from injuries they've incurred doing it".

In its original form, yoga was a spiritual as well as physical discipline. The aim was to enable those who practise it to become more conscious, more aware and better able to deal with burgeoning levels of daily stress — as well, of course, as becoming more supple. And there's no doubt it does have benefits. Yogis are renowned for their strength and flexibility, their powers of concentration and ability to withstand tension. Studies have shown that regular practice boosts the immune system, reduces depression and prevents postural problems. Earlier this month, researchers at the University of Miami showed that doing yoga can help breast-cancer sufferers curb the fatigue that affects their quality of life; other studies suggest it can improve osteoporosis and osteoarthritis, lower blood pressure and even enhance your sex life.

What has been less commonly reported, until now, is yoga's capacity to cause pain rather than heal it. In America, hospital surveys have shown that yoga injuries soared by 136% between 2000 and 2007, and figures continue to rise as more people take up the practice. "There has definitely been an increase in Britain, too," says Keith Waldon of the Society of Sports Therapists. "It's partly down to poor teaching and partly down to bad technique."

Physiotherapists say that some of the traditional postures, or asanas, create too much flexion or tension in the joints, which, when warm, can be stretched beyond comfortable limits, compromising joint tissue. Matt Todman, a physiotherapist with Six Physio, says that handstands and load-bearing moves are bad news for many people because they place immense pressure on the spine. "People think yoga is good for their back," Todman says. "But for the majority of people it can make back pain worse."

In his book, Broad lists endless papers in science journals that have identified yoga's implication in everything from hyperflexion of the neck and trapped sciatic nerves to damaged vertebral arteries, blood clots and swelling from extreme motions of the head and neck. It has been linked to cerebral damage and blurred vision, even strokes. In an interview last year, Susan Eaton, a 45-year-old from San Francisco, told the *American Self Magazine* how she had been doing yoga two or three times a week for two years when she pushed herself into the fish pose, an asana that involves lying on the back, spine arched, chest up and with the top of the head resting on a mat. Although she had done it before, Eaton says she "felt uneasy, as though I was pushing myself to the edge".

Over the next three days, she experienced head, neck and jaw pain. On the fourth night, she woke up suddenly, with the entire right side of her body limp and thought she had suffered a stroke. Doctors informed her that she had torn her left carotid, one of the two arteries in the front of the neck that supply the head with blood. A clot had formed and reached her brain. It was three months before she could return to work; yoga was the likely cause.

How can things have gone so wrong for a practice that once typified grace and fluidity? As an industry, yoga is woefully unregulated. The British Wheel of Yoga is a national governing body whose own teacher-training diploma is 500 hours long and takes two to four years to complete. Those who undertake it must have at least two years' yoga experience and have probably done a foundation course beforehand, too. But that level of rigorous standard doesn't prevent some people claiming to be yoga instructors after a weekend course.

More than half a million people in Britain attend yoga classes — many more practise at home, or privately with teachers — and its popularity has spawned an abundance of unscrupulous and underqualified instructors who lack the training and physiological knowledge to recognise when someone is vulnerable to injury. The gulf between good teaching and bad is huge and into it plunge far too many individuals willing to put their faith in someone who promises to steer them to better health.

In three  
decades,  
yoga  
has



And stretch: what do you feel about yoga? (Thomas Schmidt)

mushroomed from a church-hall activity into a colossal money-making industry with the unappetising fallout that entails. Even its staunchest disciples acknowledge that things have shifted immeasurably and, all too often, the modern take on the ancient art form courts commercialism and competitiveness to destructive level. Mollie McClelland, a yoga teacher at the Alchemy Centre in London, says, “There are such huge egos in yoga”, among both teachers and their charges. “You see people pushing themselves too far, doing things they shouldn't really be trying, just to prove something to others,” she says. “It results in bad technique and is so unnecessary.”

Among the most overtly commercial is Bikram yoga, performed in a room heated to 42C, which promises to help you achieve the slimness and tone of an A-lister. Critics claim the heat encourages overstretching and muscle damage among those not accustomed to flexing their bodies so intensely. “The trouble with it is they grab beginners who shouldn't be doing it,” McClelland says. “It can be really dangerous if you don't know what you are doing.”

There is a growing sense, too, that the mass marketing of the ancient discipline has caused confusion and led to the benefits of more established types of yoga being misinterpreted. Leela Miller, a teacher at Triyoga in London who has worked with Madonna, says that people too often

end up practising a variety that is totally unsuitable for their body or fitness levels. Take ashtanga, she says, which occupies the higher-energy end of the yoga spectrum and attracts thousands of newcomers every year because of its calorie-burning benefits. “In India, ashtanga was actually designed for young boys with highly mobile and energetic bodies,” Miller says. “Now you get 55-year-old women doing it and wondering why they get injured. In an ideal world, people should stop doing ashtanga when they are 25 and move on to another less demanding form. You shouldn’t be throwing your body around like that in your fifties and sixties. But it happens.”

Deciding which type of yoga to plump for should take into account age, experience and fitness level. McClelland says there are two main branches of yoga, and many of the varieties practised in the West — including sivananda, iyengar and vinyasa or “flow” yoga — fall under the umbrella of hatha yoga, which embraces the more physical aspects of asanas. Kundalini yoga, on the other hand, is more spiritually based, focusing directly on the attainment of energy levels. There is no right or wrong approach, McClelland says, and you should start by asking what you want to get out of yoga in the first place. If it’s stress relief or emotional support, then kundalini is a good bet. If you are a woman in her forties plagued by aches and niggles, then a natural progression (or side step) from the fast-paced ashtanga and power yoga is iyengar, which evolved from the same principles, but with adaptations to suit older or less robust body types. “Iyengar uses a lot of props and teaches you how to align the body properly,” she says. “It is slower, but very effective.”

Sivananda is a slow-paced and thorough programme of 12 poses that will suit those looking for long-term results and vastly improved flexibility. Viniyoga is very precise and will suit perfectionist personalities. “There are so many different styles,” McClelland says. “There is something for everybody.” Often, it comes down to personal recommendation — people should research yoga styles and instructors in much the same way they would a cosmetic surgeon or aesthetic dentist. “Ask around and try before you commit, because even if someone is well qualified, it doesn’t mean their approach will suit you,” she advises. “Always attend a beginners class and preferably head to a specialised yoga centre where different types are on offer. Many will recommend a consultation before you get going.”

Perhaps the best advice is that if it hurts or causes any discomfort — during or after — then you really shouldn’t be doing it. “It is that simple,” Miller says. “You should always feel better at the end of a yoga session than you did at the beginning. If you don’t, then something is wrong.”

## Yoga saved my life

Practised badly, yoga can wreck your body. But I think it saved my life. I took my first serious class 12 years ago, when my mother was dying. Her diagnosis had come out of nowhere, and we were reeling. Now, in the final weeks of her life, I was trying to hold down a high-stress job and spend as much time with her as I was able. My head was all over the place, and my body was falling apart as a result.

I had a constant headache, I was anxious, nauseous, my breathing was ragged, and broken nights spent in a chair had aggravated a hip and knee injury. I felt like I was going a bit mad. My GP recommended I try yoga, more for my mind than anything else, I suspect.

From my very first class, I felt better. My fractured attention was focused, my breathing was calmed, and the headache and nausea receded. I quickly realised that breathing was at the root of most of my symptoms. Anxiety was causing me to shallow-breathe in the upper part of my chest, meaning there wasn’t enough CO<sub>2</sub> in my lungs. As soon as I began to breathe more efficiently — and the yogic breath is a huge part of the practice — my symptoms disappeared.

That was the beginning of my regular practice. I did my research and found a teacher I trusted. That’s incredibly important. I don’t want to sound all hemp and lentils about it, but yoga has

helped me find a calmer head space, as well as improving my geriatric hip/knee problem. There's a school of thought that says we engage in the physical practice to prepare our bodies to sit in lotus and meditate — it's all about finding that calm. Any type of exercise approached too aggressively, done too frequently or taught with insufficient skill is going to injure you. Yoga shouldn't have to take the rap for that. *Mia Aimaro Ogdenp*

## Yoga or Pilates?

The two get lumped together as “bendy body” classes, but they are distinct. If yoga doesn't work, try Pilates; it's hard at first, but devotees believe it scores higher on the following:

**Body sculpting** Yoga's focus is flexibility, whereas Pilates is all about strength. Through weights, resistance training and emphasis on posture, it gets supertrimmed results — see Pippa Middleton. “Pilates gives better muscle definition,” says the Pilates teacher-trainer Bethia Hope-Rollins. “The movements are more precise, so you call on all the deeper muscles, and that's what gets the toned look.” It's best for toning the stomach, since nearly all the moves require core stability (hence the yummy-mummy rep).

**Risk of injury** “Instructors assess movement and analyse posture, so you know exactly how far someone should push themselves,” Hope-Rollins says. Because of the focus on a stable pelvis and spine, Pilates is useful for people with back or hip injuries, and one-on-one Pilates is increasingly prescribed as a form of physiotherapy.

**Headspace** Pilates can be a more effective workout, through intense concentration on minute movements and breathing. As the Pilates specialist Francesca Giacomini puts it: “Yoga takes you outside the body through meditation. Pilates has you stay in your body by tuning your mind into your muscles.” *Francesca Hornak*

[pilatesformovement.co.uk](http://pilatesformovement.co.uk), [fgpilates.me](http://fgpilates.me); [pilatesunion.com](http://pilatesunion.com)

## Yoga wasn't for me

Warming up to play squash one October afternoon in my mid-thirties, I felt something twang in my lower back. I did what most men would do, played on and then made a huge fuss the next morning when I could barely move. So began my years of back pain.

Like all sufferers, I pursued anything that might offer relief — massage, chiropractic, acupuncture and, eventually, yoga. In making you more flexible and concentrating on the core muscles, yoga, I was told, was excellent for backs. Not wanting to live with the ever-present low-level ache that would flare up into crippling agony every so often, I thought it was worth a try.

The first weeks went well: salutes to the sun, child pose, downward dog... This might just work. Then we started to advance: the triangle pose, the warrior. The dull ache in my back started flaring up into crippling agony with more regularity, so much so that I mentioned it to a doctor, who happened to be Indian. He told me it was probably the yoga. In his view, the western body is not suited to yoga: we are too big and bulky. “For instance, everyone thinks they should be able to touch their toes. This is nonsense. Some bodies are just not physically made to do it and shouldn't be forced.” I stopped the yoga. My back has since recovered. *David Mills*

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