

'Doing yoga saved my broken back'

By Jane Elliott

Health reporter, BBC News

Yoga has long been considered beneficial to the body, but could it be a cure for lower-back pain?

Yoga teacher John Aplin is certain that it can.

After he broke his back in a walking accident 12 years ago he was impressed by the effect yoga had on his recovery.

Now the professor in foetal and maternal health at Manchester University has signed up to be part of a large trial to test how lower-back pain responds to a 12-week course of yoga therapy.

More than 300 people in five centres across England have been recruited for the York University trial and each participant will be monitored for a year afterwards.

Professor Aplin said his own experiences of yoga therapy had made him keen to take part as a tutor.

"I had been thinking about yoga interventions, so when this came through I was quite interested because of my own background," he said.

Professor Aplin said he broke several bones, including three vertebrae in his back and ribs, when he fell 30 feet off a crag in 1996.

There were fears that he might never walk again and he was kept immobile in hospital for six weeks to allow his bones to slowly recover.

Full recovery

"I was quite weak," he said. "Obviously you lose muscle bulk as you spend time lying down.

"So I began very gingerly to practise yoga again and at that time had advice from my teacher and the Iyengar family in India, who had founded the yoga school that I teach in.

"They said they wanted to see pictures of my injuries so I had somebody take pictures of my torso, showing the shape of my rib cage after these injuries, various pictures of my ribs, broken fingers and toes.

"These pictures were faxed to India and they looked at them and recommended a programme for me.

"I pursued this programme and became stronger and made a full recovery.

"The accident was in the July and I went back to teaching yoga the following January. I went back to work gradually and back full-time after three months."

Professor Aplin said he was positive it was the yoga that aided his recovery.

"It was hugely instrumental in helping my back," he said.

"As a scientist I looked at the effects of doing certain postures and monitored the effects that day and the day after and working out what should be done in a systematic way - that was hugely helpful," he said.

Possible treatments

David Torgerson, director of the University of York clinical trials unit, said there had been several smaller trials in the US into the effect of yoga on lower-back pain, but that because they were so small it had been unclear if any benefits were down to the therapies or a particular teacher.

He said their Arthritis Research Campaign-backed project would assess moves from the two most popular types of yoga.

These are Iyengar yoga and Hatha yoga, favoured by the British Wheel of Yoga.

"We hope that at the end of it we might have a potential treatment for back pain," he said.

"Evidence on back-pain treatments shows that exercise in some form or another is beneficial for back pain, and yoga is a form of exercise.

"It is also a type of exercise that tries to improve people's posture, which may have an additional effect."

The yoga classes will be carefully structured for people who are complete novices and will not involve any difficult poses.

They will start off gently but become more demanding over the 12-week period, with a combination of stretches, bends, lying, sitting, standing and relaxing poses.

Patients will also be encouraged to practise daily at home.

A spokesman for Arthritis Research Campaign said it would be interesting to see whether Professor Aplin's experiences would be replicated.

"John Aplin's incredible recovery from his injuries, helped by his dedication to yoga, is inspirational," he said.

"It will be fascinating to find out if our trial helps people with less severe, but more long-term back problems in a similar way.

"If so it could have major implications for the treatment of chronic low-back pain."

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