

# Pilates can really help you get back to good health

If I ran a business and my personnel office told me that output was down due to the fact that 10 per cent of the workforce were off sick, I'd be pretty anxious.

Back-pain is the blight of many individuals and when levels of staff absenteeism from the workplace due to its effects, reach such high levels there are serious issues to be addressed. You see, it doesn't just affect the employee with the backache. There are significant consequences.

Back problems can affect almost anyone in their day job. In fact, it's estimated that the agonising affliction costs the UK economy £5 billion a year and that 10 million working days are lost annually because of musculoskeletal problems including lower back pain.

The traditional remedy for a 'bad' back is to dose up on painkillers and take lots of bed rest. A more modern approach is to engage in movement with no bed rest and minimal medication. Masking the very feeling you are experiencing with pain relief will only prevent you being able to 'tune in' to your body.

In any given day, I see a variety of people with lower back pain in my Pilates classes. They may differ in age, size and weight and their issues may be caused by bad posture, arthritic limitation through injury and sport or other. My purpose is to help them manage their back and joint pain by awareness, through movement and strengthening, to ensure future episodes are few and far



**Help:** Malcolm Thomson takes part in a Pilates taster session with Carol Westmorland

between. Unsurprisingly, most people wish they had started to care for their backs and joints sooner in the acute stage before it became chronic.

I recall being told, some time ago, by my father that cycling shoes were not designed to be walked in. After time they wear down and will then not fit properly onto the pedal. This once led to a very regrettable incident involving a call of nature, hot tarmac and a slope. Fortunately the combination of a time trial – my body was full of endorphins and three weeks of intensive help put me right. When, as I frequently hear in my work the words, 'I landed on my coccyx' surface I have my own fond memories.

Back pain can occur, unlike my experience, without necessarily knowing the cause. You may have slept awkwardly or simply

sneezed unexpectedly. Either way, when you are in the initial stage of acuteness, try to take it easy for the next 24 hours. Do not to stop altogether, but take things at a gentler pace if you can.

If that is impossible, then lie on your back and with knees tucked gently in to your chest rock from side to side. In the privacy of your own home! This is important to keep your circulation moving.

You may already have a relationship with a local physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor. If not, after three days, it is worth being put in touch with a professional who can give you the very best care. It is recommended that you seek help early.

I received manipulative therapy for an injury which, although uncomfortable, worked immediately. Using an age-old

technique to release joints that have got stuck, the therapist combined massage and mobilisation to the soft tissues with a short, sharp thrust so that the stretch went through to the underlying joint. This thrust, with its associated cracking noise, is thought to release carbon dioxide trapped in the joints so that the fluid between healthy joints can flow into its place, lubricating the bones and easing movement. It even sounds fantastic in black and white.

You could also combine massage with osteopathy and acupuncture, using needles in the muscles which are cramped and causing pain and also in the traditional energy meridians.

My first acupuncture session was extraordinary.

I left the clinic giggling for no good reason for the rest of the day. In my opinion they should

re-name it laughter therapy. It encourages oxygenated blood to flow to the area the needle has been inserted which boosts circulation, easing lactic acid and alleviating pain. These combinations worked to ease backache and, in my experience, can be quite a tonic. In the same way that movement can provide the answer to the problem once it has occurred, so it can be the prevention.

The very same movements that the therapists use to ease the tightness caused by backache are the ones that strengthen the smaller muscles around our joints and make us more robust and better able to avoid the problem in the first place. Something Pilates practices.

Indeed, this is where we started. Businesses and individuals alike seem to need to be reminded of the benefits of prevention over cure.

A workforce that can reduce its absenteeism by any margin through providing on-site preventative therapy will find it money well spent.

It doubles as a way of ensuring that the employer can be seen to genuinely care about the well being of its workforce.

No individual in their right mind wants to be laid low with back or joint problems. A regime of what is, after all, gentle exercise, will build up strength and improve postural stability that will go a significant way towards reducing the risk now, and in the future, of being afflicted.

Quality of life is restored.

## Can I end my Wainwright collection on a real high?

I've never been much of a 'collector'. I briefly flirted with stamps as a child and – confession time – I still have a horde of Abba memorabilia in my loft. (In my defence, it was the 1970s and I was very young!) But – and here's another confession – I have recently become hooked on the Wainwrights.

A few years ago, a friend of mine proudly announced he was coming to the end of his plan to climb all 214 of the fells given their own chapter in Alfred Wainwright's seven *Pictorial Guides to the Lakeland Fells* – known as the Wainwrights. "Oh, you've probably done them all four or five times, haven't you?" he said.

Well, there are some fells that I've been up dozens of times,

including High Pike, which is a favourite of mine on summer evenings. And I've lost count of how many times I've climbed Skiddaw and Helvellyn. But his comment got me wondering how many Wainwrights I'd 'done'.

So, I downloaded a list from the internet and started counting... I'd done about 160. Since then, without really dedicating myself to the task, I've ticked a few more off, but these have largely been as a by-product of walks rather than as an end in themselves. That is until very recently...

With only 24 Wainwrights left, I've suddenly become more serious about completing this popular hill-walking challenge. While out researching the Red Tarn route that appears in this edition of

*Active Cumbria*, I decided to make a detour to 'bag' Catstye Cam. The previous weekend, while on the fells between Ennerdale and Wasdale, I decided it was time to tick off Steeple too, adding a couple of hundred feet of ascent to an already tough outing.

My biggest problem now is trying to decide which of the remaining fells I should save for my grand finale. Nothing too tough, just in case I decide to pop open a bottle of something bubbly with a few friends – but it needs to be a top worthy of celebration.

That's where the problem lies. In almost every case, those 24 fells haven't been climbed because I've simply had no desire to climb them or, as in the case of Rossett Pike, I've bypassed them countless

times on my way to somewhere more interesting.

So, what's it to be? Soggy Sour Howes or Sallows? Nondescript Seathwaite Fell? Or Armboth Fell, which even Wainwright described as one of the few fells that are "not really worth climbing"? I've got a feeling it's going to be Kirk Fell because every time I look at that amorphous lump, it simply looks too much like hard work. An unrelenting ridge that climbs a massive 2,300ft in just one mile; a tricky scramble up from Black Sail Pass; or a steep, loose clamber from Beckhead Tarn. These are the routes on to Kirk Fell. None of them appeals. And it's not exactly a fitting tribute to so many wonderful years of fell-walking. Maybe I need to give this more thought...

