

## Do we know the power of Yoga?

**Caroline Phillips**

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One woman has thrown away the wheelchair to which she was confined for two years.

She suffered from ME (chronic fatigue) for 15 years and now, confounding medical orthodoxy, is symptom-free.

Another patient says he endured asthma intermittently for 30 years - and is now cured.

Improbably, both say their transformation is down to yoga. They are not alone, because many major health benefits are now being claimed for the discipline.

The number of people practising in Britain has tripled in the past decade and now the first NHS yoga facility in a primary healthcare centre has opened in

London's Kentish Town.

"It specialises in yoga for diabetes, back pain and breathing difficulties," says its founder, biochemist Dr Robin Monro, also founder of the Yoga Biomedical Trust, which runs clinical trials into yoga and offers lessons.

A recent study showed that yoga can significantly lower levels of triglycerides - the fats in your blood which if elevated can lead to heart disease.

Another concluded that yoga can increase brain gamma-aminobutyric levels, which when lowered are associated with depression, anxiety, epilepsy and even Alzheimer's.

It's also known to lower blood pressure, cholesterol levels and improve memory, sleep, energy, gastrointestinal function and tolerance to pain. In some instances, chronic pain can be eliminated.

Jo Manuel is a practitioner who helps sufferers of illnesses from muscular dystrophy to Parkinson's.

In 2004, she founded the Special Yoga Centre and launched Yoga for the Special Child, a unique service in Britain for disabled children.

For a small, charitable facility in Kensal Rise, it punches way above its weight - Jo's techniques have been adopted by all [New York's](#) special-needs schools.

It was to the SYC that [Samantha Cameron](#) took her and David's late son, Ivan, who suffered from cerebral palsy and epilepsy. "Sam said yoga helped her son relax and find more peace in his body," says Jo.

Last month SYC held a charity art auction and raised a whopping £100,000 - with artists from [Marc Quinn](#) to [Sam Taylor-Wood](#) personally donating works - to fund its work.

Television presenter Gaby Roslin said: "I've watched Jo working with autistic children. I'm astounded by what she achieves with kids who can't normally even make eye contact or sit still."

The centre teaches several forms of yoga, from ashtanga to kundalini, in general classes and has 40 instructors.

There are special classes for adults with everything from ME to MS and sessions for pre-natal teenagers. Jo's speciality, a hatha-based practice, is the one she uses to treat 350 special-needs children a week.

Jo believes yoga has a positive effect on even the most serious illnesses. Fiona Agombar, a former high-flying executive and author of *Beat Fatigue Through Yoga*, is one of the centre's teachers.

"I had ME for 15 years, I was in hospital for months with appalling fatigue and muscular pain, and in a wheelchair for two years.

"The medical view is that after five years with ME, you don't get better," she says. "With yoga, I've become symptom-free. Last year I went trekking in [Nepal](#)."

So can yoga cure any illness? "MS, for example, isn't going to be stopped by it," says Jo. "But it can slow the degeneration and help sufferers manage the pain. I also see Down's children meeting their developmental milestones earlier than those who don't do yoga."

Dr Monroe believes more investigation is necessary if yoga is to be accepted as a part of everyday healthcare.

For Jo, however, success is measured in smaller steps, such as when the mother of one disabled girl who attends SYC told her recently that thanks to Jo's yoga classes her daughter had slept properly for the first time in nine years.

Special Yoga Centre, The Tay Building, 2A Wrentham Avenue, NW10 (020 8968 1900, [www.specialyoga.org.uk](http://www.specialyoga.org.uk)).

Pamper Evening 26 June, 5pm-10pm, £5 entry fee, treatments from reflexology to Indian head massage.

*For donations visit [www.justgiving.com/syc/donate](http://www.justgiving.com/syc/donate)*