



Positions of strength

If you've tried everything else, and still have painful periods, pelvic congestion may be the problem. Amazingly, yoga can help

Yoga has long been accepted in the West as an effective way of staying supple and keeping stress at bay. But some experts now believe it can also be used to treat female ailments – including painful periods, fibroids and hot flushes.

Françoise Freedman, an experienced yoga teacher, is convinced that yoga can help with a wide range of problems, including pelvic pain, irregular menstrual cycles, ovarian cysts, endometriosis and infertility. Freedman runs the only yoga class in the country specifically for women with reproductive disorders.

"One woman who came to the class had a large ovarian cyst that she was advised to have removed," she recalls. "After several months practising yoga, she was told it had reduced so much in size that she didn't need surgery. Another was in so much pain with endometriosis that she was advised to have a hysterectomy, but yoga has made it more manageable."

Freedman, a medical anthropologist at Cambridge University with a special interest in reproductive health, first became convinced yoga could help female disorders after using it to deal with her own painful periods. Although widely perceived as a form of relaxation in the West, yoga is also an effective "healing therapy," she says. "And you don't have to be an acrobat to benefit."

Yoga is thought to help with female complaints in several ways. Its range of physical postures (known as *asanas*) combined with breathing techniques (called *pranayama*) tone the muscles, increase flexibility and, according to Freedman, improve circulation and relieve congestion in the pelvic area. Yoga is also thought to have a beneficial effect on the nervous system, relieving stress, and on the endocrine glands controlling female sex hormones.

In her class at the Yoga Therapy Centre, based at the Royal London

Homeopathic Hospital, Freedman teaches the postures of classical yoga but adapts them to female needs, focussing on the pelvic and abdominal areas.

"Many women do aerobics or gym workouts thinking this will tone their abdominal muscles," says Freedman. "But it's only the superficial layers that get used. In yoga, the deep abdominal muscles are stretched and toned. These muscles hold our reproductive organs in place, and if they become constricted, it can lead to problems."

Similarly, the yoga pelvic floor lift, used with breathing techniques, is, she

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claims, more intense than ordinary pelvic floor exercises, and very effective against stress incontinence. Vaginal tone is also improved. "We don't often talk about vaginal tone – it's an area regarded as extremely secret," says Freedman. "But having good vaginal tone can give us more vital energy."

On another level, yoga aims to restore the flow of life energy (called

prana) and to restore balance to the body. "How this happens is difficult to describe in medical terms because doctors here don't recognise these energy fields," says Freedman. But Yoga's stress-relieving qualities, she says, make it particularly valuable for women undergoing medical or surgical treatment.

"If a woman has cervical dysplasia (abnormal cell growth), for example, she may have to undergo invasive procedures," Freedman explains. "She may feel very afraid. Yoga can help her cope with her fear." Women are always advised to seek medical help where appropriate, she stresses. Some have orthodox treatment in tandem with yoga.

Freedman also believes the deep relaxation that yoga encourages can help unblock deep-seated, emotional patterns that can lead to problems with sexuality or infertility. "In the past six months, three women who have been trying unsuccessfully to conceive for years have become pregnant after taking up yoga," she says. "Once a woman listens to what her body is telling her, she can find her own healing."

There are, as yet, no research findings to support such claims. But

Robin Monroe, founder and director of the Yoga Biomedical

Trust, a registered charity, points out there is already good evidence that yoga can help with other chronic medical disorders such as asthma, diabetes, back pain, hypertension and heart problems. "In India it has been used for centuries as a traditional medicine," he says.

One woman in the class said it had taught her to become friends with her body for the first time in her life. "Françoise helped us to become conscious of parts of our bodies we don't usually discuss – the vagina and the ovaries and what's going on there," she says.

"Since I've been going I'm physically stronger and more supple and my

