



Flu fighters

Swine flu is scary stuff but yoga may be able to offer some protection during the coming flu season, writes **Patricia Ezechie**

With the flu season nearly upon us – and as we try to make sense of the conflicting recommendations from the government and the World Health Organisation on the merits and dangers of Tamiflu – are there any precautions we can take to protect ourselves from infection? Or once infected, is there anything we can do to reduce the symptoms of flu and return to full health as soon as possible?

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* – one of the most important yoga texts – tells us that the proper practice of *Pranayama* eradicates all disease, while the *Shatkarmas* (the six cleansing processes) can help rebalance the *doshas*. Regular *asana* practice can also help strengthen the body, circulation and lungs, encouraging a deep sense of relaxation and peace and in so doing return us to full health.

So can we look to yoga for some answers? *Pranayama* and the *Shatkarmas* (*Jala Neti*, in particular) undoubtedly have benefits for the respiratory system. But perhaps the beneficial and preventative qualities of yoga as a possible combatant to the flu are to be found more in the link between stress and its effect on the immune system. The ability of yoga to help reduce stress and aid relaxation is commonly known.

The effects of stress on the immune system are wide and far reaching – with a sustained period of stress affecting the production and longevity of the white blood cells within the body, and its ability to manufacture antibodies. As the white blood cells are the first line of defence – protecting the body from disease and infection – any compromise in their quantity or ability to function will leave the body more susceptible to infection.

The ability of yoga to help reduce stress and encourage relaxation in the body and the mind has long been recommended by Sages and Yogis and it seems that Western medicine is finally beginning to recognise this. In fact, a recent study by Harvard Medical School discovered that there are far more 'disease fighting genes' active in individuals who have practiced relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation over a long period of time compared to individuals who do not practice any form of relaxation.

The research team speculate that this so-called "Relaxation Effect" could be as powerful as medical drugs but without the side effects, and that more importantly, as the genes can be switched on by practicing relaxation methods regularly, everyone can benefit by taking up these practices at any time.

More importantly, the effects are cumulative – the more regular and sustained the practice, the stronger the immune system and healthier the hormone and blood pressure levels.

Therefore, any practice that helps to reduce the effects of stress on the body will keep the immune system functioning optimally both in the short and long term and in doing so make the body less susceptible to getting the flu. In this way, it seems yoga can certainly help protect you from the flu.

For those that do practice yoga regularly, keep up the good work, and perhaps boost your immunity still further by eating a balanced healthy diet and supplementing with *Echinacea* and vitamin C. If you don't practice yoga, it's never too late to start.

Nonetheless, even with the best will in the world, consummate and diligent practice and preparation it is still possible to catch the flu. In this case, stay well hydrated (try ginger tea, peppermint infusions, elderberry, Star Anise), add herbs and spices to your drinks and snuffs (cayenne, turmeric, garlic, fennel, cumin and coriander), get plenty of rest, and boost your immune system with a few gentle poses.

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