



Head Over Healing

An anti-gravity holiday hanging upside down can launch you to a new realm of relaxation and pain relief. You don't have to be batty, just a bit brave to try this de-stressing, decompressing technique. Naturopath **Caroline Robertson** explains

Monkey magic

The secret to standing straighter, thinking smarter and ageing slower may be as simple as child's play. Kids love to turn upside down on monkey bars, unaware their antics are the best way to counter the accordion crunch of gravity. For centuries, yogis have practised inversions to improve their mental and physical state. Hippocrates also hung his back pain clients upside down in harnesses for relief. Gravity boots and anti-gravity yoga slings are the newest ways people are exploring this way to wellness. But aside from a red face, what can you gain from turning your world upside down?

Stretching science

Everyone suffers musculoskeletal issues at some stage in their life, be it back ache, neck ache or joint pain.

Compression and rotational fatigue are caused by downward bodily load from sitting, bending, lifting and one-sided activities like writing, tennis and playing musical instruments. This gravitational grind squashes the intervertebral discs contributing to pain, degeneration, muscle spasm, nerve impingement, height loss, poor circulation, fatigue, respiratory problems, hormonal and digestive disturbances.

Because gravity bears down on our discs, they lose lubrication, becoming thinner and more compacted. This increases our potential for pinched nerves, stiffness, pain and disc prolapse. Going upside down gaps the vertebrae, allowing alignment and a flow of fluid into the area. Juicy joints provide more cushioning and flexibility, reducing stress from shock impact and stretching. As personal fitness trainer, Pilates instructor and author of *Getting Older, Staying Younger* Dana Eden found with her clients, "The benefits of using regular inversion with my clients include improved circulation, flexibility, back pain relief, reduced muscle tension, stimulation of lymph flow, assistance in posture correction and reduced effects of ageing due to gravity."

ALL PICS THINKSTOCK



Elongating upside down reverses loading, lengthens muscles and stimulates lymph to flush out inflammatory lactic acid and wastes, easing workout aches. Many find it's the perfect full body stretch to conclude a cardio and strengthening session, especially after lifting weights.

According to physiotherapist John Conomos, physiotherapy teaches that dehydrated discs are a key contributor to chronic back pain. As babies, our discs are 90 per cent water, which are depleted to 70 per cent by age 70. As we age, we get up to five centimetres shorter from thinning discs and spinal curvatures. Inverting plumps up discs, decompresses and aligns the spine so we stand straighter and taller.

Contrary to concerns that inversion raises blood pressure, when Dana Eden opened Health Club 50, she inverted over 100 members and found the majority of people reduced their blood pressure after inversion. Hanging upside down gives the heart pump a break, and studies show it can reduce heart rate and induce relaxation, as when blood accumulates above the heart, the sympathetic flight/fight response switches off.

Rewards of regular inversion

- Rehydrates discs by opening and flooding joint canals
- Reduces nerve pressure by decompressing and healing nerve roots
- Realigns the spine as the S curve lines up with gravity
- Relaxes muscles, giving them the break they're begging for

- Prevents height loss by plumping the discs and aligning posture
- Boosts brain function and energy by bathing the brain in fresh, oxygenated blood
- Stimulates circulation, reversing the venous flow
- Activates lymph, aiding cellulite, detoxification and immunity
- Relieves varicose veins and hemorrhoids by reducing congestion
- Delivers nutrient-rich blood to complexion, hair and teeth
- Maintains flexibility by stretching muscles, strengthening ligaments and loosening joints
- Enhances cartilage and joint lubrication, reducing inflammation and arthritis
- Builds core strength, especially when combined with exercise
- Improves balance. Skydivers, gymnasts, springboard divers, and scuba divers find that inversion tunes their bodies and inner ears to the inverted world. It has also been used to normalise the ear canal as a treatment for motion sickness
- Aids incontinence. As Dana Eden observed: "I have many clients tell me how they no longer suffer from incontinence when using inversion on a regular basis. I believe this is because inversion helps to lift your internal organs back up to their original position, reducing the pressure on the pelvic floor muscle."

Flipping fitness

An inversion is any position placing the head below the heart. Yoga offers mild inversions such as downward dog and full inversions such as the shoulder stand and headstand. Mild postures prepare us for full inversions. Though these give great benefits including increased concentration, circulation and relaxation, there are detriments; compressing the head, upper back and neck strain the spine and skull. Sudden twists or movements can cause pain and injury. It's best to work towards the headstand and shoulder stand slowly, with exercises to stretch and strengthen your body.

The anti-gravity yoga sling is excellent for agile athletes. However, its unstable swinging makes it difficult to relax and release while hanging.

Gravity boots work if you have a steel support bar, strength and flexibility. However, hoisting your legs up to the bar can twist and strain the spine and abdominals. The advantage is that it takes less space than an inversion table. An inversion frame is the ideal option as it provides perfect support, easy transition and angle options.

Start slowly by inverting on an empty stomach at 40 degrees for a few minutes each day. Initially you'll feel a head rush of pressure, but this reduces over time. Take a few deep breaths.

Relax your ankles, knees, hips, vertebrae, shoulders, elbows, neck, jaw and eyes. Slowly rock your pelvis back and forward. If you're uncomfortable, reduce the angle or return to the upright position. You can also rhythmically rock up and down to promote circulation and lymphatic drainage.

As your confidence increases, invert at greater angles for longer. A 60-degree angle for five to 10 minutes is sufficient. However, the complete 90-degree stretch really releases the spine.

Most people reap rewards quickly and add it to their daily routine. As Dana Eden shares, "My clients fall in love with inversion. They love the feeling of a good stretch but best of all, love the feeling of a body that feels and acts younger."

Precautions

Those with high blood pressure, eye diseases, fractures, medullary pins, surgically implanted orthopedic supports, extreme obesity, spinal injuries, hernias, ear infections, weak bones, heart or circulatory disorders are discouraged from inverting. Women who are pregnant or menstruating should also avoid it. Beginners and children should be supervised during the exercise. **NH**

Naturopath and homoeopath Caroline Robertson offers private Trinity Beach retreats, worldwide consultations, guided meditations and overseas health retreats. carolinerobertson.com.au

