

I relax with... ..chanting yoga

described as a 'virtuous life', Claudia Zeff was at risk of heart disease. A genetic predisposition to high blood pressure meant she faced a lifetime of medication and the risk of health problems in later life, including stroke and kidney damage. Indeed, although she was put on blood pressure drugs two

Despite living what doctors

showed one of the walls in her heart was beginning to thicken - a worrying sign. 'I knew that could be hugely problematic as I got older and that motivated me to do

years ago, a recent scan had

54-year-old. What Ms Zeff did is sign up to a pioneering programme run by a cardiologist where meditation and chanting are used to combat high blood pressure. Amazingly, she is not only now

scepticism.

lowered.

something about it,' says the

Convert: Claudia Zeff, who faced a lifetime of medication

medication-free, but her damaged heart had repaired itself.

However, there is growing scientific study to show that meditation may be a powerful tool against a range of health problems. It's thought the calm state reached through yoga makes the brain subconsciously alter the sympathetic nervous

system - the part of the body that responds to stress. As a result heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure are all

The benefits of yoga have long been recognised in the East, but in the West elements of the discipline - such as chanting

mantras and deep breathing - have been viewed with

One of the biggest studies of its kind, presented to the American Heart Association last year, found patients with coronary heart disease who practised meditation and chanting had nearly 50 per cent lower rates of heart attack, stroke and death compared to non-meditating subjects. The nine-year trial followed men and women with narrowing arteries in their hearts. The patients were randomly assigned

to either practise meditation or to participate in a control group which had health education classes in traditional risk

factors, including diet and exercise.

Another study last year of students at Georgetown University found that chanting helped lower blood pressure after three months of regular practice. When her blood pressure reached the high level of 156/105 two years ago, Ms Zeff, who heads an arts charity, was told she

would need to take medication for the rest of her life.

she says. 'Seeing the problems it causes her - such as

her about a programme he was running. Dr Carroll had teamed up with a colleague, London GP and yoga expert Dr Juhi Gautam, to offer a drug-free way to tackle hypertension.

hardening of the arteries and the risk of angina and kidney disease - prompted me to see if I could stop it getting worse. I also didn't want to be on increasing medication for the rest of my life.'

She consulted private cardiologist Dr Richard Carroll, who told

'My mother suffers high blood pressure and I have inherited it,'

Dr Carroll sees increasing numbers of patients who do not want to take daily medication for the rest of their lives. 'With meditation,

and not hypertension caused by lifestyle - and gave them the option of trying to come off or reduce medication using an intensive yoga programme. This focuses on stretching.

back to normal.

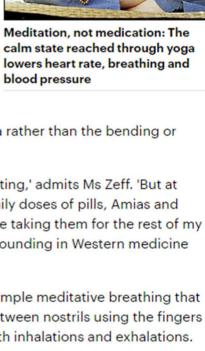
her own daily.

the benefits are maintained for long periods afterwards, and increasingly so the more

cardiology patients - those with genetic hypertension

you meditate,' he says.

He identified suitable



form of yoga dedicated to meditation. After less than a month her blood pressure had started to reduce and it is now 107/83 down from 156/105. Since March last year she has come off both her medications. Regular

scans show the thickness of the damaged heart wall is now

She sees Dr Gautam once every few months and meditates on

'It has made a massive difference,' she said. 'It is the difference between being healthy and being unhealthy. I allow myself 20 minutes each morning to go through them and I will do it for ever.'

The scheme is a UK first and the long-term benefits have yet to be ascertained. It is only available privately and a session with

Dr Gautam costs between £120 and £250.

long-term benefits of meditation on blood pressure. Fotini Rozakeas, cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, advises that it should be used to complement medication, not replace it.

She said: 'It is known that regular physical exercise can help to

And despite the research, some experts are still unsure of the

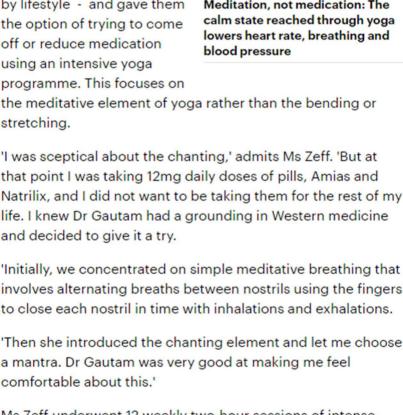
lower blood pressure and that relaxation techniques can also improve it in the short term. However, there is no evidence that meditation is a suitable alternative to medication for people with high blood pressure." But as far as Ms Zeff is concerned, yoga has meant freedom

She said: 'Hopefully the results I've experienced will now mean I can avoid medication and the impact high blood pressure

would have had on my life as I got older.'

For further information: www.portobelloclinic.com.

from a lifetime of pills.



that point I was taking 12mg daily doses of pills, Amias and Natrilix, and I did not want to be taking them for the rest of my life. I knew Dr Gautam had a grounding in Western medicine and decided to give it a try. 'Initially, we concentrated on simple meditative breathing that involves alternating breaths between nostrils using the fingers to close each nostril in time with inhalations and exhalations. 'Then she introduced the chanting element and let me choose a mantra. Dr Gautam was very good at making me feel comfortable about this." Ms Zeff underwent 12 weekly two-hour sessions of intense yoga meditation, learning the methods of pranayam yoga - a