

6 BEST THERAPIES for athletes

The latest bodywork treatments promise to boost your performance, repair raw limbs and keep injury at bay. Team *H&F* tested them out

WORDS: Sarah Ivory

Are you in pain after you exercise? If fitness folklore is to be believed, it's only a matter of time before you succumb to injury. Athletes and coaches will tell you that the injury cycle comes in three stages: you're either injured, about to get injured or recovering from injury. And this isn't mere doom and gloom – science confirms it. Data from the Injury/Illness Performance Project, which works to reduce injury risk in elite athletes, shows that 43 per cent of top level athletes suffer at least one injury per season, and some suffer multiple injuries. Frequent exercise places cumulative stress on the joints and muscles, so something has to give – usually a muscle or a tendon.

How do you keep the niggles at bay? Prevention is always better than cure. But many athletes and exercisers are turning to new therapies. How well do they work? We sent a team of wounded and willing *H&F* staffers to test some of the most promising techniques.

FUNCTIONAL THERAPY

GOOD FOR: RECURRING INJURIES

The promise 90 per cent guarantee that injured exercisers will be pain-free within 12 weeks of treatment.

The therapist Stuart Green, ex-county level athlete with an MSc in Exercise Science who's helped professional PGA golfers compete after injury.

The science If one part of your body isn't working properly, another part overcompensates. Functional therapy remedies these imbalances by fusing developmental kinesiology, which considers what changes the body needs to make to go back to the 'postural norm', with techniques from physical development. It aims to improve strength, posture and flexibility within weeks.

H&F tester says 'I've had back pain for years. An assessment revealed that my back muscles are working overtime, while various other body parts aren't doing their job. Stuart assessed my flexibility, and supplied a routine of corrective exercises.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'I walked away from the initial session feeling pain-free (albeit temporarily) and am confident that I can permanently improve my posture over time.'

Any downsides? 'You must be prepared to put in long-term work.'

Course of treatment An average of four sessions with a four-week tailored home programme.

The details £120 per hour; functionaltherapy.co.uk

FASCIAL STRETCH THERAPY

GOOD FOR: RUNNERS

The promise To increase your flexibility and iron out knots, to improve performance and ward off injury.

The therapist Tegan Haining, one of few Fascial Stretch Therapists in London and a performance trainer at Bodyism gym.

The science A web of connective tissue called fascia links your muscles, blood vessels and nerves. Fascia is at its most useful when it's pliable, as this enables it to slide and stretch as your body moves. Sometimes, however, fascia can become rigid and increase your risk of injury. Unlike other

forms of stretching that target muscle, Fascial Stretch Therapy (FST) eases fascia, but a certified therapist is required to pull and move limbs in a fluid movement.

H&F tester says 'Many professional athletes, including rugby players and top-level runners, use this form of stretching – and it's easy to see why. My tight quads and glutes were instantly loosened. I could even move my leg five inches closer to my chest than I was able to pre-treatment. Tegan was careful to ensure that I synchronised my breathing with each

stretch and that I didn't stretch further than necessary.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'I felt the positive effects straight away but they didn't last. I would recommend using this therapy at least twice a month.'

Any downsides? 'At times the pressure of the stretch is quite intense, so people with lower back problems should take care.'

Course of treatment One treatment will ease tired limbs but regular exercisers will benefit from repeat sessions.

The details £125; Bodyism.com



Top tip!
Knees are especially vulnerable to injury. You can strengthen yours by doing light knee lunges. Keep your back straight as you lunge, it'll reduce the stress on the joint.

THE BOWEN TECHNIQUE

GOOD FOR: RUNNERS

The promise To heal the injured area and the connective structures surrounding it, improving mobility, stability and range of movement.

The therapist Caroline Kremer, Bowen practitioner (carolinekremer.com)

The science Bowen treats injury, ligament strain and aching muscles by helping your body to recover and heal itself through manipulation of the fascia. During the massage, the therapist rolls over the structure of the muscle, moving the superficial and deep fascia against each other. This sends a message to the brain to instigate change and promote healing.

H&F tester says 'After this treatment, I felt deeply relaxed and lighter on my feet.

The massage also combines deep breathing techniques, which I found energising. By taking a deep breath, then slowly releasing it while making an 'S' sound, I engaged my diaphragm more efficiently.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'I had an appointment after running a marathon, to release tension in my hips and help my hamstrings and calves recover faster, which I think they did.'

Any downsides? 'The benefits of the massage are felt in the days after the treatment, so don't expect instant relief.'

Course of treatment Three hour-long treatments.

The details £150 for a 90-minute initial consultation. Visit The Bowen Therapy Professional Association (bowen-therapy.co.uk)

CLINICAL PILATES

GOOD FOR: ENDURANCE ATHLETES

The promise A tailored Pilates treatment that retrains your core muscles to help prevent injury.

The therapist Ailish Toomey, a specialist women's health physiotherapist trained in Pilates.

The science Despite being known as a form of exercise in its own right, Pilates was originally introduced as a rehabilitation programme. It focuses on core stabilisation, because a sturdy

centre is key to injury prevention. The core muscles – namely, the transversus abdominis (TVA) muscles, obliques, abdominals, multifidus muscles surrounding the spine, and pelvic floors – contract together prior to any limb movement, keeping the centre of the body rigid. By training your core muscles to work efficiently, Pilates therapy helps exercisers avoid and beat injury.

H&F tester says 'This is my kind of treatment! The session starts with an ultrasound scan of my core muscles to determine which muscles my body relies on to run. My core is "oblique-dominant" and Toomey advises that,

as a distance runner, I'd benefit from activating my TVA (the deep abdominal) muscles, which are key to spinal stabilisation. I practise engaging these muscles lying down, and then move on to the Pilates studio to learn corrective moves that will improve my body's neural pathways, encouraging the TVA muscles to switch on when I run.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'Absolutely. Practical and applicable – this is the treatment for anyone at risk of a repetitive strain injury, whether runner, skier, cyclist or horse rider.'

Any downsides? 'You need to be committed and focused, as you won't be sitting back and letting someone else do the work!'

Course of treatment Six weeks or more, depending on the nature of the problem. Everyone has an initial assessment, which can be followed up with Pilates classes.

The details £70 for a one-to-one assessment and £30 per class (with a maximum of three people per class); sixphysio.com

Top tip!
Don't overdo exercise. Rest is vital: it gives you time to repair your muscles and rebuild energy. And don't increase your physical activity by more than 10 per cent per week.

Don't miss!

Want to perfect your cycling technique? Pop in to see Nichola Roberts on Fleet Street, London, for an hour-long Six Physio Cycle Assessment. She'll look at your joints, muscle balance, posture and biomechanics to help hone your bike skills. (sixphysio.com)

For a robust body, give an Athletic Conditioning class at Equinox a go! The 45-minute workout will improve your strength and fitness through cardio, free weights and body weight work. You'll do challenging intervals, switching between cardio and strength work, to get your blood pumping. (equinox.com)

Fine-tune your aptitude for outdoor sports at Good Vibes Yoga for Runners and Cyclists class. The class takes place once a month on a Saturday to teach sporty types stretching, strengthening, mobilising and balancing skills that will reduce injury risk. (goodvibesfitness.co.uk)

Try The Balancer treatment to boost your recovery skills after a hard workout. Based on lymphatic drainage techniques, the massage therapy system flushes out lactic acid and other toxins, allowing fresh blood and nutrients to improve recovery. (bodybrilliantltd.com)

Ease aches and pains, and release tight muscles, with a Zero Balancing session. This mind-body therapy uses finger pressure and gentle traction on key weight-bearing joints and soft tissues to aid relaxation, reduce stress and improve postural alignment. (evolvewellnesscentre.com)

Susceptible to running niggles? Master run-specific strength and conditioning work at a Nike Training Club 'Train to Run' class. The whole-body workout targets important jogging muscles, such as the core and lower body muscle groups, to help runners hone perfect form. Classes are free of charge. Find one close to you at facebook.com/NikeTrainingClubUK.

Deep Tissue massage has long been popular in the sports world, and Balance Bodyworks' Deep Tissue & Sports Massage is among the best. Masseur, Mia Robbins, specialises in remedial massage, deep tissue massage, myofascial release and trigger point therapy, so all exercisers are in very good hands. (balance-bodyworks.com)

OSTEOPATHIC CONSULTANCY

GOOD FOR: INJURY-PRONE ATHLETES

The promise A manual therapy that focuses on areas of tension and leaves your body feeling relaxed.

The therapist Amberin Fur, a structural and cranial osteopath who was a member of the medical team at the London 2012 Olympics.

The science Osteopathy is one of only two Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) treatments regulated under English law. It's a manual therapy that focuses on the alignment of the whole body to treat and strengthen the musculoskeletal system. Through joint manipulation and massage techniques, osteopathy boosts the body's nervous, circulatory and lymphatic drainage systems. It's often used to remedy back pain but is equally effective at treating repetitive strain injuries, such as patella tendonitis.

H&F tester says 'A confession – I'm not new to osteopathy. I was a regular at my local osteopathic centre until an increasing amount of bone cracking sent me running. So, in my opinion, there's a fine line between not enough and too much manipulation – and Fur has got the balance right. She took time to understand my sports background, current goals and emotional state before assessing my posture and giving me exercises to do at home. On top of a little joint mobilisation, Fur uses a wide range of techniques including massage, cranial techniques and breath-work. The best bit? She has a good understanding of sports and sporty people. Her treatment is manageable and easy to fit into a workout regime.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'Definitely – I felt really relaxed post-session and a lot more mobile, plus I even felt tired after the treatment!'

Any downsides? 'Osteopathic manipulation techniques won't suit everyone. While safe, pain-free and effective, the clicking of bones can be quite disconcerting to some.'

Course of treatment It will vary depending on the problem, but Fur recommends three to five sessions.

The details The initial session is £135 with a follow-up treatment for £110; (58moltonst.co.uk)

KRIOTHERAPY

GOOD FOR: RECOVERY

The promise An intense dry-cold therapy that awakens the body's healing process, stimulating circulation and immune response.

The therapist Emma James, physiotherapist at Champneys Tring Resort.

The science Working on the same principle as an ice bath, kriotherapy is said to help muscles recover after a strenuous workout. In cold temperatures, blood rushes to your core to protect your heart and major organs. As your body returns to normal body temperature, your blood floods back to your extremities, improving circulation to damaged soft tissue. Kriotherapy involves standing in a big freezer, at a temperature of -125°C, for three minutes, followed by a circulation-boosting Power Plate session. There's limited research to suggest whole-body kriotherapy speeds up recovery from soft tissue damage, but many athletes swear by it, including Premiership footballers.

H&F tester says 'I enjoyed this treatment; it was a bit of a novelty to dress up in the unique outfit you must wear to protect against frostbite in the ice chamber: two pairs of gloves, a headband, two bra tops, two pairs of shorts, stockings and clogs! I found it invigorating and had a spring in my step afterwards. Even though kriotherapy is colder, it was a lot more pleasant than sitting in the ice bucket on boot camp! The chill took my breath away but my skin felt amazing afterwards.'

Did it live up to its promise? 'My skin was smooth, tight and glowing with health. I even had less visible cellulite! Plus, when combined with personal training and physiotherapy, it's definitely beneficial for recovery from a race.'

Any downsides? The treatment is very cold, but it's over in a flash.

Course of treatment Have this treatment regularly – once a week – if you experience post-exercise pain.

The details £55 for 25 minutes; champneys.com



For more injury prevention tips, visit tinyurl.com/HFInjurytips