

Treating RSI – Body Training Techniques

The term Repetitive Strain Injury is an umbrella term used to describe a number of specific musculoskeletal conditions (e.g. carpal tunnel syndrome or tenosynovitis) as well as 'diffuse RSI', which is more difficult to define but which recent research attributes to nerve damage. These conditions are often occupational in origin. Lack of adequate diagnosis or access to appropriate treatment can exacerbate the condition and sometimes leads to job loss and economic hardship.

In the UK, GPs receive relatively little training in musculoskeletal disorders. Ideally your doctor will refer you to a specialist who has taken an interest in RSI-type conditions, usually a rheumatologist or neurologist, for a more complete diagnosis.

There are many possible treatments for RSI but initial medical help is likely to involve some kind of 'hands on' therapy to provide relief from symptoms (See the RSI Association information sheet *Treating RSI – The 'Hands On' Therapies*)

For a more complete recovery and to prevent relapse, it may be helpful to learn a body management or postural retraining technique. The skills required to undo bad habits, balance out muscle groups and realign posture take time to develop, but the investment often pays off in terms of reduced pain and tension.

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is a postural retraining method developed by FM Alexander (1869-1955) for guiding the individual to 'good use' of his/her body. Lessons are usually held on a one-to-one basis and involve the practice of everyday activities like sitting down and standing up, whilst the teacher gently encourages the correct alignment of head and neck.

The emphasis is on consciously preventing unwanted, unnecessary and harmful habits (e.g. such as reacting too quickly to stimuli, unduly stiffening and tightening muscles and joints and putting too much effort and tension into work activities). As these habits occur repeatedly through everyday life and hence become unconscious, part of the process of applying the Alexander Technique is to become aware of what is actually happening in the body in order to re-learn harmonious usage.

The effectiveness of the Alexander Technique is well documented and has been the subject of several scientific studies. It is increasingly recommended by doctors, and many medical insurance companies will pay for lessons if these are prescribed by a consultant.

Lessons usually last 30 – 45 minutes and up to 30 lessons are normally required to integrate the results into your daily life. At this level of commitment many RSI sufferers have found the Alexander Technique beneficial in promoting recovery and preventing relapse.

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London NW5 1RS
Tel: 0207 284 3338

www.stat.org.uk

Pilates

Pilates is a body conditioning method that targets the deep abdominal muscles to build up their strength and improve flexibility. As well as helping to resolve the postural problems associated with RSI, the precise, flowing movements of Pilates can form part of a controlled rehabilitation programme. Exercises are co-ordinated with breathing which will help with general relaxation.

Pilates is normally taught in small groups, though one-to-one lessons can be arranged. It takes several months to absorb the basic principles and regular practice is required to maintain the benefits. There is no overall recognised professional body but the Body Control Pilates Association is the largest teaching organisation in the UK and has a wealth of information on its website.

Body Control Pilates Association
14 Neal's Yard
Covent Garden
London WC2H 9DP
Tel (020) 7379 3734

www.bodycontrol.co.uk

Yoga

There are many forms of yoga and classes can be found within adult education, health clubs, gyms and complementary therapy clinics. Though in essence an ancient mind, body and spirit discipline, the physical movements alone will help with fitness, flexibility and stretching and can help to manage the symptoms of RSI.

Yoga involves practicing a series of positions. Take it gently to begin with as there may be some poses that could put your arms or neck under further strain. It is essential to tell your Yoga teacher about your RSI before your first class.

As well as relief for the original condition, the benefits of deep breathing and greater body awareness can help to maintain emotional and mental well-being and Yoga is often recommended by pain management clinics.

At present, there is no national umbrella organisation in the UK. However there is a listing of Yoga centres and organisations at www.yogauk.com. This is also a good place to search for a teacher in your local area and to find books on the various Yoga traditions.

Tai Chi

Tai Chi is often described as an internal martial art, characterised by soft relaxed movements and trained at a slower speed than other martial arts. There are many interpretations of the art, some involving partner work and weapon forms, but a typical class moves from warm-ups into the full practice of a choreographed set of gentle movements.

Most people who start Tai Chi do so for the well-documented health benefits. These include increased flexibility, suppleness and muscle strength, while the relaxed, natural breathing helps to release tension. The principle of promoting the smooth flow of energy around the body is rooted in all aspects of traditional Chinese medicine, including acupuncture.

There are several umbrella organisations covering the various styles. The websites listed below contain information on Tai Chi classes and events across the UK.

www.taichifinder.co.uk

www.taichiunion.com