




DESTINATION  
HEALTH

# Are *you* choosing the right holiday?

**Feeling in need of a break? Before you book, spare a thought for your wellbeing and tailor your holiday so you get just what the doctor ordered. It could relieve a range of health issues and even help you sleep better**



**I**t's official: we're all working too hard. Whether you're an office worker or a managing director, you're probably putting in too many hours. A YouGov poll found that nearly a third of workers aren't taking their full holiday entitlement, which should be at least 28 days, including bank holidays.

So why are so many of us in no hurry to escape? Are we finding new levels of fulfilment in our jobs? Or are unprecedented numbers

forging meaningful relationships at work? Regrettably not. It appears that growing workloads and competition for jobs are taking their toll, leading to a culture of what economists have dubbed 'presenteeism' in the workplace. This is particularly true in offices, where staff are glued to their desks at lunchtime, don't take breaks and send emails late into the evening.

Another survey, by the recruiting website Glassdoor, found that the

most common reason for not taking holiday was 'fear of getting behind' (11 per cent). Others didn't take holidays because they felt no one else could do their work (9 per cent) or because they were 'unable to disconnect' (7 per cent).

Being tied to our jobs isn't just changing the shape of our social and home lives – it's also affecting our health, experts say. While most of us have experienced the general rise in energy levels and mood after a holiday, new research shows that time off can also have specific benefits for our physical, mental and emotional health. Of course, the flip side of this is that if we're

not taking enough holidays, we're more likely to get sick.

Researchers at University College London found a direct correlation between greater working hours and

**'Growing workloads and competition for jobs have led to a culture of presenteeism in the workplace'**

increased risk of coronary disease and stroke. Perhaps unsurprisingly, joint and back pain are the number one cause of absence in the UK, accounting for 31 million lost work days in 2013 according to the Office

for National Statistics. Coughs and colds were second at 27 million, while stress-related conditions were responsible for 15 million sick days.

So if you're convinced a break is a good idea, it's time to choose the right type of holiday. Along with interesting sites, good weather and value for money, you should consider whether the trip meets your health needs.

Read on to discover our holiday prescriptions for allergies, back pain, heart disease, insomnia and more. You might even pick up some good habits to use back home. ►



## BACK AND JOINT PROBLEMS

An active holiday in the sun could tick all the boxes if you suffer from joint and back pain. There's no doubt about it – sedentary lifestyles are not conducive to healthy backs and joints, and human beings are not designed to be stuck at a desk all day.

'Sitting in the same position for long periods of time, as many of us do at work each day, can cause stiffening of the muscles in our back, neck and pelvis,' says osteopath Orit Huntley, of Meadowside Osteopathy in Surrey. 'Over time, the muscles can become shortened and tight, which limits the freedom of movement in the spinal joints, resulting in higher risk of back and neck pain.'

Of course, it's easy to get into the habit of a torpid lifestyle – use the laptop on the train into work, sit at a desk for eight hours, then get home and slump on the sofa. But that's where a holiday can really help.

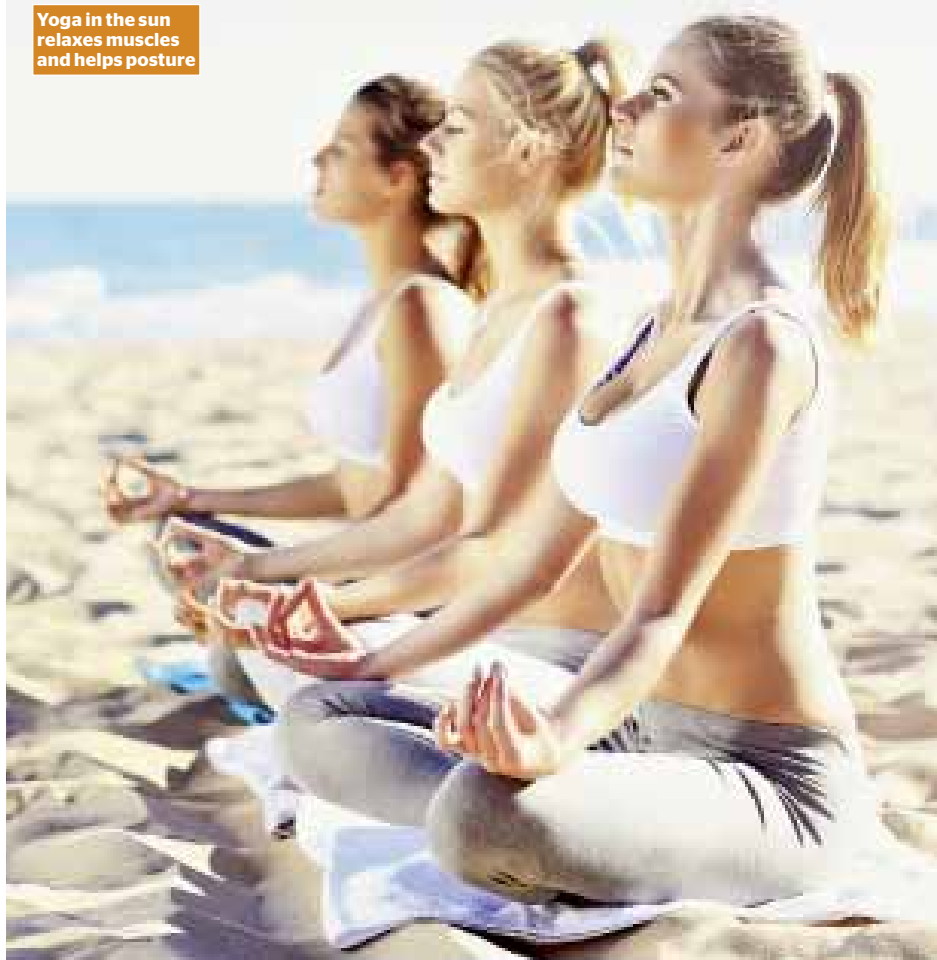
'Being in a warmer climate, where the heat helps your muscles relax, and having the chance to use your body differently by moving around, offers a great opportunity to restore your muscles to their full length and your joints to their full range of motion,' Huntley explains. 'This is important for

their healthy function and for good blood flow to the tissues.'

An active holiday can also help prevent arthritis and osteoporosis. According to the Arthritis Foundation, bones grow stronger when they're active, and you can improve their density with gentle weight-bearing exercise such as walking because this makes bones produce more cells. Joints also need movement to remain healthy, so consider going hiking or even taking a holiday dance class to strengthen your hips and lower back. For knee and joint pain, swimming is a more gentle therapy because the water supports your body weight. Yoga is ideal for improving posture, and warmer weather makes those stretches easier as the heat relaxes muscles, making you more limber.

Also, many hot countries have a diet of oily fish. 'Omega-3 is most easily absorbed from oily fish and seafood,' says Huntley. These essential fatty acids can reduce inflammation and ease arthritic stiffness, and are one reason Italy was found to be the second healthiest country in the world according to last year's Bloomberg Rankings. Only Singapore, where fish is the main source of protein, came higher.

Yoga in the sun relaxes muscles and helps posture



## HEART DISEASE AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Feeling stressed out? Opt for a holiday where you can unwind in the sun to let your heart rest and recover. For many of us, the daily dash to get to work on time (and then the rush home to pick up the kids, cook dinner and get them to bed) activates the body's stress response. This gives us a massive dose of the natural steroid cortisol, increasing blood pressure and shutting down non-emergency functions such as the immune and digestive systems.

Long periods spent in this mode can take its toll on the body. Prolonged high blood pressure can stop the heart pumping effectively and lead to heart failure. It can also cause heart disease, in which fatty tissue builds up in the arteries, and can cause strokes. According to the Stroke Association, this is a higher risk for women, with 55,000 more women than men having a stroke every year.

The good news is that taking just two holidays a year can help you relax enough for your heart to recover. In a 20-year analysis of more than 5,000 people, researchers from the Framingham Heart Study in the United States found that women who take two or more holidays a year suffer less from certain types of cardiovascular disease. And in 2000, scientists from both the State University of New York and the University

of Pittsburgh published the findings from their nine-year study of more than 12,000 men, showing that regular holidaymakers are 31 per cent less likely to die of cardio-related illness.

When you're opting for somewhere you can totally unwind, you may want to make sure there's a sunlounger close at hand, because it's thought the sun's rays can lower blood pressure. Recently, volunteers taking part in a study by Edinburgh and Southampton universities lay on tanning beds for two sessions of 20 minutes each – one session with ultraviolet (UVA) rays plus heat to mimic sunlight, the other simply using heat. The results showed

that the participants had lower blood pressure after UVA exposure, caused by nitric oxide being released from the skin into the bloodstream and dilating the vessels.

'We believe that nitric oxide from the skin is an important, and so far overlooked, contributor to cardiovascular health,' says Martin Feelisch, a professor of experimental medicine and integrative biology who led the study. 'Avoiding excess sunlight exposure is critical to prevent skin cancer, but not being exposed to it at all, either out of fear or as a result of a certain lifestyle, could increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.'



Soak in the health benefits of UVA rays

## ANXIETY AND INSOMNIA

If you find yourself up until the early hours looking for things to worry about, consider a holiday by the sea. A study by the National Trust found that people sleep for 47 minutes longer on average after a walk along the coast, compared to 12 minutes of extra sleep after a walk inland.

Scientists have suggested this may be because sea air is full of negative hydrogen ions. These charged particles, abundant in sea spray and concentrated in fresh air, improve the body's ability to absorb oxygen. More oxygen can boost levels of the feelgood brain chemical serotonin, making us less prone to anxiety so we can get more shut-eye.

The National Trust's survey of 100 people, aged between 21 and 82, also looked at the effect of a coastal walk on mood. Nearly two-thirds of the participants said it gave them a distraction from everyday stress, and 84 per cent said they felt positive about their lives afterwards.

While the coast is a prime location, a study by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, found that getting out in countryside and parks can also boost sleep. Analysing the sleep patterns of 255,000 people aged 65 and over, researchers found a link between access to green space and improved sleep quality.

'It's hard to overestimate the importance of high-quality sleep,' says Diana Grigsby-Toussaint,

a professor of kinesiology who led the research. 'Studies show that inadequate sleep is associated with declines in mental and physical health, reduced cognitive function and increased obesity. This new study shows that exposure to a natural environment may help people get the sleep they need.'

Even if you don't head for countryside or the coast, any change of environment or sightseeing trip can help you to have a better night's kip. 'There's more brain work involved with a novel experience,' says Professor Jim Horne, a neuroscientist at Loughborough University's Sleep Research Centre. 'Therefore the brain needs more recovery, which means you sleep better and longer.'

Sunlight is also important for lifting our mood and helping us sleep as it regulates the hypothalamus gland. This part of the brain controls production of serotonin and the sleep hormone melatonin, and governs the circadian rhythms that control our sleep patterns. When we don't get enough sunlight, these functions are disrupted, leaving us out of sorts. This can result in symptoms of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) such as persistent low moods, irritability, feelings of despair, guilt, worthlessness and lethargy.



Getting out and about can put your mind at rest



A Mediterranean diet can keep skin looking wholesome

## SKIN PROBLEMS AND ALLERGIES

An escape to the Mediterranean or another sunny destination could do wonders for sufferers of eczema, asthma and other related allergies.

A 2012 study in the *Journal Of Allergy And Clinical Immunology* compared the health of 7600 children living in north and south Australia. It found that children in the south were twice as likely to develop eczema and asthma and to be allergic to peanuts and eggs. This was mainly due to a lack of sun – sunlight on the skin helps the body create vitamin D, which clears up eczema by fighting inflammation and increasing antibacterial processes in the skin. Vitamin D also boosts good gut flora, helping the immune system fight allergies.

The link between sun and eczema was first recognised in 1991, when a British study tracked the health of 126 children with the condition before and after their holidays. Those who had spent time in a Mediterranean climate showed significant improvement on their return, whereas the symptoms of those whose parents had taken them to northern England got worse.

Sun can also be good for psoriasis, a condition where skin cells are overproduced causing itchy dry patches to flake off. 'UVB light penetrates the skin and slows the growth of affected cells,' says Dr Susannah Baron, a dermatologist at Kent and Canterbury Hospital.

The body can produce its daily requirement of vitamin D with 30 minutes of full-body exposure to sunlight. Do this without sunscreen, because it can block synthesis of vitamin D in the skin. Try to avoid the strongest sun between 11am and 3pm, and use a moisturiser before and after sun exposure to keep your skin hydrated and prevent itching. That said, some eczema sufferers are sensitive to sunlight – if this applies to you, keep skin exposure without protection down to 10 minutes a day.

Skin can also benefit from a Mediterranean-style diet of oily fish, beans, lentils, vegetables and olive oil. The omega-3 essential fatty acids in oily fish have anti-inflammatory properties – according to the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, USA, these can alleviate the symptoms of eczema. ■