



Alice Hart-Davis has sought relief from her bad back for 14 years. In the first of a series of cut-out-and-keep guides, here is her advice to all those who, like the Queen, have a royal pain in the back

How I conquered backache

BACK problems crept up on me slowly. There was no dramatic incident, just a gradual ache which spread across my lower back and gradually got worse. Since then, despite the best efforts of London's finest osteopaths, physios and complementary practitioners, my bad back has become a fact of life. At times, I have cried with rage and frustration.

The problem seems to be a weak link in the lower vertebrae, where a disc can start to bulge out from its moorings (it has never, thank goodness, actually "slipped"), exacerbated by a sedentary job and the fact that I clench my jaws tightly all night when I should be relaxed.

As anyone with a bad back will know (and this includes the Queen, presently crippled by sciatica, in which the pain from the back shoots down the leg), whenever it "goes" there's a dreadful split second of realisation as you feel the ripple or crunch of the thing giving way, before the searing pain of muscle spasm sets in.

Along with the ruined holidays, there have been the interviews that I have conducted lying down, and long meetings around boardroom tables where, obliged to sit upright, I've been so distracted by pain that I could barely concentrate on the business in hand.

I think I have now worked out what needs to be done to keep the thing in check — enough exercises to maintain sufficient strength in the "core muscles" of the stomach and back. But it's never quite that simple. An incautious piece of lifting, or something out of the usual range of movement patterns, can still throw the blasted thing even when I'm feeling strong and — theoretically — less vulnerable.

The thing is not to panic; it will, gradually, get better. There are, however, many remedies and treatments that can either protect you or get rid of the pain more quickly. Over the years, this is what I've tried.

OSTEOPATHY

Barrie Savory (£70; 020 7935 0844); Nish Joshi (£90; 020 7487 5456; www.thejoshclinic.com); Simeon Niel-Asher (£75; 020 8347 6160); Grania Stewart-Smith, (£60; 020 7286 2615); Garry Trainer (£80; 020 7722 6203).

When my bad back first arrived back in 1992, I was baffled and alarmed by this tiresome pain that gradually got worse. Eventually, a colleague whispered the name of the legendary Barrie Savory.

"Hmm," Savory said, assessing my back for all of three seconds as he ran a finger thoughtfully down my spine. "I expect it hurts just here," and jabbed in on the precise spot, before crunching it back into alignment. The relief — both physically, and the fact that someone knew exactly what was wrong — was enormous and thus began a habit bordering on dependency.

Since appointments with Savory are hard to secure, I have also seen the osteopaths listed above for manipulation. All are excellent, particularly when backed up with deep-tissue massage (to unlock spasmed muscles) along with applying an ice pack for 20 minutes every few hours and 800g doses of ibuprofen.

Joshi uses acupuncture when the pain is severe; Niel-Asher digs in with his elbow on "trigger points" to release them and uses gentle cranio-sacral therapy, too; Stewart-Smith often

YOUR CUT OUT AND KEEP GUIDE



deploys Bowen Technique — a very gentle form of bodywork; and Trainer is a dab hand with acupuncture needles. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

BODYACTION MACHINE

£3,820; individual sessions from £30 (www.slimimages.co.uk; 01733 897 202) Standing on the wobbling baseplate of the BodyAction machine, my first thought was that it was far too gentle to do any good. The plate rocked from side to side, which means my muscles had to work, involuntarily, to resist the movement and keep me upright. But I'm not sure that it feels like real exercise.

Martyn Burgess of Slim Images, the company which imports the machines, insists that I am underestimating the machine's capacity. The platform, he says, uses a similar form of vibration technology to that found in the much-

hyped new exercise machines PowerPlate and VibroGym, which offer the equivalent of a full 50-minute weights session in the gym in just 10 minutes. BodyAction, which has only been available in the UK for four months, is generally aimed at encouraging the unfit or incapacitated towards gentle exercise.

So does it help my back? Too early to tell, but I can feel how effectively it works the muscles which it targets. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

SPORTS MASSAGE

From £40, London School of Sports Massage (www.lssm.com) A deep-tissue massage good for easing muscles which become too tight in the wrong places from spending hours at a desk or in a car and then drag the spine out of alignment. I never feel that massage alone will fix a bad back (although if you believe most back problems will fix themselves, it may be all you need to help the healing along), but it is good for keeping potential problems in check — and is enjoyable. Needs to be done regularly. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

HELLERWORK

Roger Golten, £100 per session (020 7935 8505; www.golten.co.uk) The ultimate bodywork, a system of "structural integration" which works deeply to loosen the overtight fascia of the muscles (the "bag" that encloses each muscle), so that the body can be eased up into better alignment. Practitioner Roger Golten gave up his job to learn the technique after it helped him solve his chronic back problems 23 years ago. His clients have included Roger Daltrey and Julie Christie.

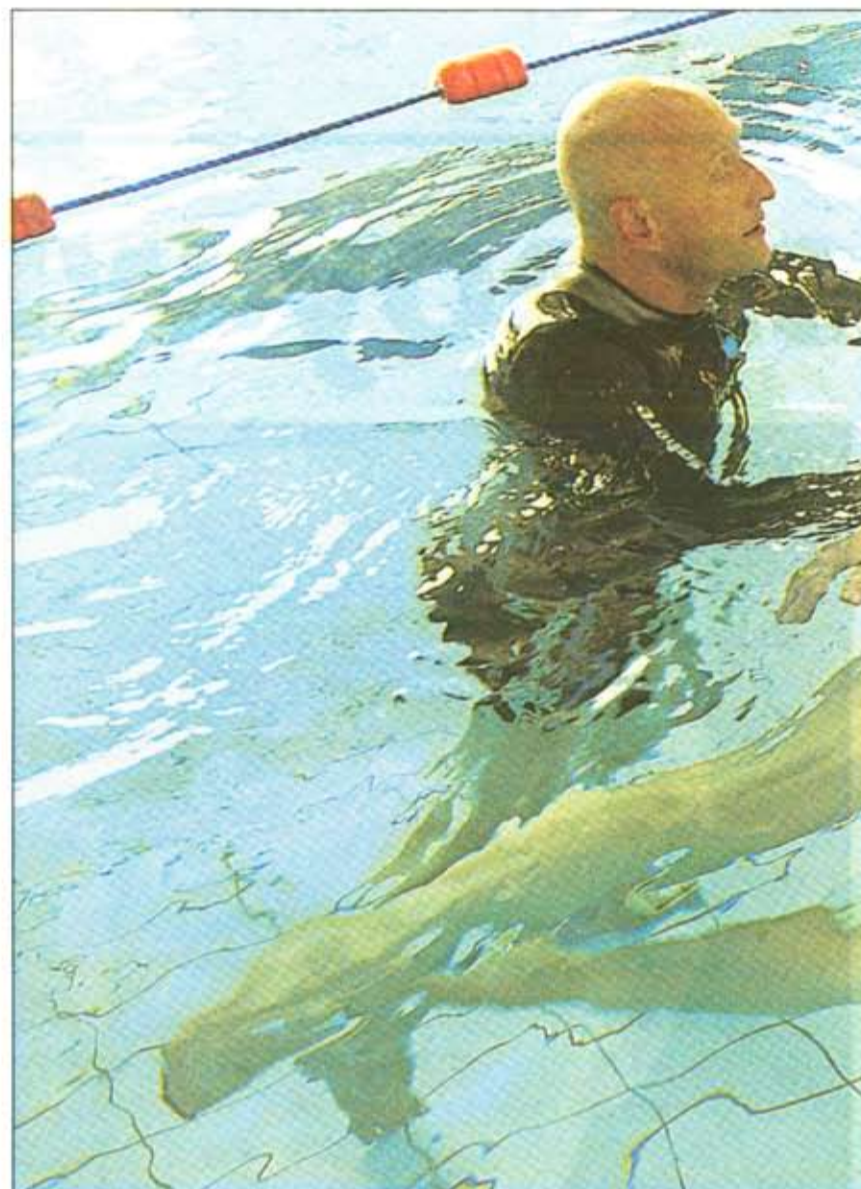
I've just finished a 10-session course and feel fabulous. I can stand straighter, breathe more freely and, miracle of miracles, Golten has persuaded my clenched-up jaw muscles (the root of my problem) to start to let go, a feat no other practitioner has achieved. Will it keep working? We'll see. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

PILATES

Alan Herdman, £32 (020 7723 9953; www.alanherdmanpilates.co.uk) I spent three years in the late Nineties learning the essence of these core-strengthening and muscle-lengthening exercises with Alan Herdman, who first brought the technique to London. It was just before Pilates became trendy and looking at Herdman's regulars, some of them genuine 1661s (people who look 16 from behind, 61 once you see their faces), made me realise quite what this exercise could do for the body. It was thorough, gentle and stopped my back deteriorating through two pregnancies. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

SWIMMING LESSONS

Shaw Method, £70 (020 8446 9442; www.artofswimming.com) Ten years ago, I took lessons at the local pool to learn to swim a decent crawl because breast-stroke can easily exacerbate back and neck problems. Recently, I've been trying to learn the Shaw Method, which applies the principles of the Alexander Technique to swimming, keeping the head, neck and spine in alignment and learning to move through the water with ease. I've learned the



movements, which create a wonderful feeling of length and openness in the spine. If I can master the breathing techniques and move properly I can see it might greatly benefit my back. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

HYPNOTHERAPY

I sought out a hypnotherapist to address my night-time teeth-grinding, since I reasoned that something in my subconscious must be making me clench my jaws. The first turned out to be more of a psychotherapist, which wasn't what I wanted; the second talked me into a state of deep relaxation, encouraged me to let go of whatever was making me do it and gave me a tape of the session to play at home. Alas, it didn't have the desired effect. **Verdict: ★☆☆☆☆**

BODYDOCTOR WORKOUT

David Marshall, aka the Bodydoctor, £80 (020 7586 6222) www.bodydoctor.com My bouts of exercising have been sporadic, rarely supervised and often interrupted by back problems. But for the past five months have been under the supervision of David Marshall, who has whipped everyone from Sophie Dahl to idle MPs into shape. It's horribly hard work but my stomach is now a wall of steel which supports my back. Result? No pain for five months (except when I play basketball, which is my own fault ...) **Verdict: ★★★★★**

ZERO BALANCING

Jeff Lennard, £45 (020 7629 2927) A gentle, soothing bodywork which can help release deep-seated trauma as well as improving physiological wellbeing. The treatment starts at the feet and works up the body, with the therapist applying light pressure with his fingers to joints and muscles, encouraging them to release whatever they're holding onto. It's a lovely treatment. I have read many accounts of how, during sessions, people would get flashbacks to, for instance, a physical or emotional trauma in the

past, connected with their current pain, but it didn't happen for me and so it didn't change my life. **Verdict: ★☆☆☆☆**

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Noel Kingsley (£70; 020 7491 3505; www.alexander-technique.co.uk) Learning to keep the neck and spine in proper alignment feels wonderful during a session, and with just a light touch Noel Kingsley encourages a tight bunch of muscles to relax. The technique focuses on re-educating habits of movement and posture, so takes time and application to learn. To my shame, I found it all too slow and didn't have the patience to persevere. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

PHYSIOTHERAPY

Metis, £50 (020 7257 6590; www.metis-uk.com) Three years ago, saddled with an agonising disc which was threatening to herniate, I tried physiotherapy combined with a targeted exercise plan at Metis, a clinic in Covent Garden. For 18 months, I had physio sessions every few weeks and did the rehabilitative exercises I was given — though not as thoroughly as I might. So I felt it was largely my own fault that though my back returned to "normal" it didn't get any better than that. **Verdict: ★★★★★**

SUPPLEWORX

Martin Jefferies, £60 an hour (020 7498 5389; www.suppleworx.co.uk) There is no point in stretching muscles if the skeleton is out of alignment, says practitioner Martin Jefferies, so first he manipulates or adjusts the joints, then sets to with deep massage to loosen muscles with all the techniques — gleaned from yoga, osteopathy and physiotherapy — at his disposal. His special range of PNF (proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation) stretches involve making tight muscles contract, holding the contracted position, then releasing, to encourage them to gain greater length. Idiosyncratic but highly effective. **Verdict: ★★★★★**



Trying everything: Alice Hart-Davis (above) tests the BodyAction machine and (top) the Shaw swimming Method