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Dorna Chee teaches yoga, the holistic practice she credits with having cleared her skin of rashes.

Auto-immune disease sufferers are turning to yoga with a twist

SOME LIKE IT HOT

BY KATIE ROOK

For years, doctors could not explain the rashes covering Dorna Chee's body. Relief came in the form of sessions at a Toronto yoga studio where the heat was cranked so high that newcomers might have mistaken the exercise space for a large sauna.

After a month of doing hot yoga — as it is colloquially known — Chee's rashes began to abate and then finally cleared.

Chee, 39, whom doctors eventually diagnosed with lupus, doesn't mind that medical health professionals struggle to explain the positive result of the yoga. Now a yoga instructor herself, she has her own theories about her recovery from an auto-immune disease that is known to ravage the connective tissues of one's body.

Chee joins a growing number of people committed to self-directed health regimens that borrow heavily from Eastern-health practices, including yoga. For people such as Chee, the absence of definitive scientific explanations for their muted symptoms is a secondary consideration. After all, she feels better.

"You have to know your own body, [as] with anything, you do what works for your body or what works for you," she says.

"What's happening with the East and West [medical] philosophies is

they're coming together more and more, so [yoga] is a great way of getting people aware of other therapies.

"Your body needs to move. [Yoga] is a great way [to bring about] mind-body awareness. The more you have awareness of your body, any disease or illness or stress [that occurs], you can better deal with."

"As with anything, you do what works for your body or what works for you"

The sweating induced by hot yoga may reduce inflammation that is a common symptom of auto-immune diseases, said Toronto-based naturopathic doctor Kristin Heins.

"When we do things like exercise and sweat, we mobilize toxins and excrete them through our lymphatic system and through our sweat, which may also reduce the inflammatory potential from within the body," she says.

"This could be used to explain why symptoms such as rashes or [other] auto-immune disease symptoms are reduced by hot yoga."

Heins cautions that people should consult with a health practitioner be-

fore beginning an exercise regimen.

On Sunday, Chee will join hundreds of other yogis gathering in large spaces in Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal to participate in giant hot yoga sessions. Their collective bending and pressing will help raise money for auto-immune disease research.

Since 2004, dozens of hot yoga studios have cropped up across Canada. One group of independent hot yoga studios is Moksha Yoga, which has at least 15 studios in Canada, three in the United States and at least four affiliate studios internationally.

Through last year's first annual event and through yoga in general, Chee says she is often approached by people who suffer from auto-immune diseases such as Type 1 diabetes, primary biliary cirrhosis, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, vasculitis, Grave's disease and thyroiditis.

Several such illnesses have been diagnosed with increasing frequency in the last 50 years, researchers say.

Characterized by the body's immune system turning on the organism itself, an auto-immune disease results in the destruction of cartilage with diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. In the case of Type 1 diabetes, the body turns on the cells that produce insulin.

"The reason why the frequency of these diseases is going up mostly in the Western world is unclear," says

Philippe Poussier, a University of Toronto professor who studies auto-immune diseases.

"Although there is a strong genetic component [to] these diseases, [the increased frequency] cannot be for genetic reasons because populations don't change their genetic makeup that quickly, so as a consequence people think that it's related to environmental factors.

"If we can figure out what in the environment was responsible for this difference, [the environmental factor] could be easier to manipulate than the genetic makeup of patients.

"It doesn't mean that you are going to cure it completely, but it would be a tremendous improvement if you decreased the risk of a particular disease by a factor of five."

For now, Chee is content to pursue any regimen that yields tangible benefits; in addition to dealing with lupus, Chee is also facing kidney disease.

"It's hard for [my doctors] to say, 'Well, this is a good thing.' They don't really see that. They like to give you medicine and they don't really talk about the overall holistic aspect of the patient."

"When somebody tells you, 'You must take a pill for this,' and they don't look at the whole person, then I think it's a disservice to the patient. You're not getting the whole picture."

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HOT YOGIS UNITE!

Yogis Canada-wide can participate in the Power of Movement: Hot Yoga Challenge this Sunday, Feb. 24 at the following locations:

Moksha Yoga Edmonton, 14925-111 Avenue, Edmonton. Challenge held at noon, call 780-481-3070 or visit <http://www.mokshayogaedmonton.com> for details.

Moksha Yoga Winnipeg, 2 Donald St. Unit 7, Winnipeg. Challenge held at noon, call 204-452-5535 or visit <http://www.mokshayogawinnipeg.com> for details.

Wellesley Community Centre, 495 Sherbourne Street, Toronto. Challenge held at 1 p.m., call 416-392-0227 or visit <http://www.powerofmovement.ca> for details.

Moksha Yoga Montreal, 3863 St. Laurent Boulevard, Montreal. Challenge held at noon, call 514-288-3863 or visit <http://www.mokshayogamontreal.com> for details

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