

At a stretch

Active Isolated Stretching is the latest wellbeing technique to arrive from across the pond. **Kamin Mohammadi** learns to limber up, get more flexible than she's ever been and walk taller, under the expert guidance of Chris Watts

If, like many of us, you spend more time sitting than you should, be it on the sofa or at a desk, chances are you have experienced stiffness and pain in your back or shoulders. If you bother getting off the sofa to go to the gym or play sports, chances are you have at some time or other experienced a related injury – one way or another, life takes its toll on our bodies, be it through doing too much, doing too little, or just doing it the wrong way.

And if you thought you had to accept all the aches and pains as part of life, then think again. New to London is Active Isolated Stretching, or AIS, a unique physical therapy that realigns your posture, alleviates pain, helps injuries heal, improves flexibility and even helps you look younger. Through a series of specially designed stretches, the therapist helps isolate specific tension in the body and then helps release it.

It sounded to me like many other therapies that I have come across in the course of my work, but as soon I walked into the treatment room to be greeted by Chris Watts, I knew this was different. With his long blonde hair and animated gestures, Watts' appearance belies his 48 years, and his easy loose movements are a testament to the efficacy of the technique. First he studied my body as I stood and, with lightning-quick speed, he reeled off a checklist of tensions and potential problems, drawing a map of my posture onto two laminated drawings of the human body, front and back. This postural analysis was highly detailed and took the best part of half an hour. And it was fascinating to see. Watts immediately corrected my posture, giving me simple techniques just for walking that would radically ease some of the pressures I was putting on my body. Very simple stuff.

Chris Watts trained in the technique in America, studying under Aaron Mattes who founded the method. He has been practicing it successfully in Hong Kong for a number of years, where he is beloved of CEOs, with clients known to fly in from the Middle East for a few intensive sessions. Watts is clearly passionate about what he does, and his knowledge of all the systems of the body is unsurpassed. As I lie on the couch for him to perform a series of stretches to target some of the tensions he has identified, Watts chats to me about the body

and what causes stiffness and inflexibility. He explains that with AIS the stretch is held for a maximum of two seconds only, but is then repeated, this way helping pump the blood into the region, increasing circulation and oxygenating taut muscles. As he explains, holding static stretches for long periods of time activates the body's protective reflex action, causing the muscles to contract rather than stretch out.

I must say that I am deeply impressed by the technique and Watts' know-how. He tells me that the human body is designed to last 120 years or more, and seems to take it as a personal affront that we all accept the ageing of our bodies at such an early age. With the flexibility that these stretching techniques help engender, there is no reason why we shouldn't stay fit and well into our 80s – or even see a 100 if Watts has his way. The loosening of tight muscles and the pressure that puts on joints, with the attendant improvement in circulation that it brings can not only make you more flexible, but also release more energy, help the skin to glow and slow the ageing process – plus banish aches and pains.

After over an hour – we only stopped because he had people waiting; Watts' enthusiasm is such that he gets carried away by trying to unravel tensions – I felt quite loose and strangely grounded, probably because I was standing up straight for the first time in years. Watts explained that he had started by loosening some of the superficial muscles surrounding one particular point of stiffness and had progressed to the deeper muscles, slowly unravelling to the root of the problem. He gave me a few stretches to perform at home, explaining that he doesn't like to overwhelm people with exercises, believing that people will only ever perform a handful of stretches at a time. I step out into the street with my next appointment already made, walking taller than I have in years.

Stretch London, Queen Anne Medical Centre, Queen Anne Street, W1; 020 7034 3340; www.stretch.co.uk. £115 for an hour.

