



Rolling manipulation helps straighten the back
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Rolfing aims to remodel back and body

by Marcus Berry

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About 70 to 80 per cent of the Swiss population suffers from back pain at least once, say experts at Geneva's University Hospital. Yet we generally focus on symptoms: painkillers, rest or massage. Marcus Berry, who suffers chronic back pain, tries out a technique called Rolfing. It is said to 'remodel and re-educate' the body and has gained a reputation for helping prevent back pain and other muscular discomfort.

As a long-term lumbago sufferer, I recently signed up for a standard ten-session series with France Hatt-Arnold, who has practiced the technique called Rolfing in Geneva for 22 years and teaches at the European Rolfing Association in Munich. Hatt-Arnold began with exhaustive questions about my medical history and an analysis of my gait (walking characteristics are often compensations for previous injury). Several alarming Polaroid snaps highlighted my gnarly spine, sloping left shoulder and pile-driven neck.

Rolfing treatment is progressively deep manipulation of the fascia – interconnecting and supportive tissue between muscles and organs sometimes described as “like the segment pith of an orange”.

According to the European Rolfing Association, the fascia reacts to certain physical injuries and postural habits by producing extra material to enhance stability and support. However, it often produces more than necessary, reducing mobility and disrupting natural carriage.

“We work with hands, elbows and knuckles applying pressure and heat, affecting the fascia’s texture by stimulating embedded mechanoreceptors,” Hatt-Arnold explained. “Rolfing restores the fascia’s elasticity and sliding capacity, allowing the body to realign so it can function with more ease.”

“It also frees the body from deep tissue restrictions and enhances its awareness in space,” she added.

Sessions can be uncomfortable at times as Hatt-Arnold slowly leans into sensitive areas with her elbow though these moments are tempered by sensations of relief. Each session is punctuated by further scrutiny of carriage and movement as well as helpful suggestions related to subtle changes in posture.

So far Rolfing has been effective. After six sessions, I’ve never felt more upright and another set of photos tells the story: straighter spine, level shoulders and elongated neck. More importantly, the back is pain free.

The official view? One back specialist told Swisster she sometimes refers patients for Rolfing with “about a 50 per cent success rate”.

Rolfing was developed in the United States by Dr Ida Rolf, who gained a Ph.D in biochemistry at 25. She spent time in Switzerland and Geneva studying physics, mathematics and homeopathy. Using elements of osteopathy and chiropractic medicine Rolf created “structural integration”, later to become Rolfing.

The method – practiced in Switzerland for some 25 years – is recognised by many insurance companies for complementary health insurance policies that cover alternative medicine.