

# The women ADDICTED to exercise

They do hours of gruelling workouts every day – not to keep trim but because they're hooked on the natural high

by Polly Dunbar

**E**VERY weekday, Lisa Vickery follows the same punishing routine. She gets up at 5am and runs from her home to work, which takes an hour and 15 minutes.

Then, before she arrives at her desk, she visits a local yoga centre for an intense, hour-long Bikram yoga class in 40c heat.

After a day's work as a TV presenter, she squeezes in another strenuous yoga session before setting off on her long run home. To most women, her exercise regime sounds as gruelling as a professional athlete's – and a world away from 'normal' workout schedules.

Yet she doesn't find it unduly demanding. 'I get a huge buzz from exercise,' says Lisa, 35, from South-West London. 'I'm addicted to the rush of endorphins through my body after a run or yoga.'

'It's a sense of euphoria which leaves me feeling energetic and clear-headed. If I don't get my "hit" in the morning, by the end of the day I'm grumpy.'

Lisa is not alone. Growing numbers of women are becoming hooked on the powerful feelings which flood their bodies after a gym session.

These sensations are caused by the rise in the concentration of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and serotonin that we experience during strenuous exercise. Low concentrations of these are closely linked to depression.

At the same time, the pituitary gland produces endorphins, chemicals which interact with the receptors in the brain that reduce our perception of pain, allowing us to keep exercising more.

They also trigger a positive feeling in the body. Half an hour of intense aerobic exercise can produce five times the amount of these mood-boosters compared to a sedentary person.

The result is a sense of euphoria similar to the effect of opiate drugs. However, just as a drug addict's tolerance increases over time, more endorphins are needed to produce the same hit.

Experts warn that this can lead to exercise addiction, a term coined in 1976 by Dr William Glasser, who studied long-distance runners.

**H**E NOTED that many fitness fanatics experienced low moods when they were unable to train. In some extreme cases, exercise came to override everything, causing relationships and work to suffer and health levels to decline.

A study by scientists in Boston found that exercise junkies can suffer the same withdrawal symptoms as heroin addicts. Being weaned off physical activity produces the trembling and teeth chattering exhibited by drug addicts who go cold turkey, according to the researchers.

Lisa's addiction began when she took up running in her 20s. 'I was feeling low after the death of a family member and, one day, I went out for a run,' she says. 'My head was really clear and I instantly felt more energetic and positive. Since then, I can't recall a day when I haven't run and I now do two marathons a year.'

'I also love hot yoga – it really gets your heart rate going and there's a sense of feeling cleansed afterwards, which I find addictive.'

She admits her obsession has had an impact on personal relationships. 'I find it tricky to meet with friends during the week, and end up making excuses because I want to fit in a run or a class, which they tease me about,' she says.

'I know most people would just do a couple of runs a week, so I understand why my friends think I'm crazy. It's definitely affected my relationships with boyfriends. They've been annoyed that I get up at the crack of dawn and they don't see me until 9pm, but it's who I am. Anybody I was with long-term would need to understand that.'

For Lisa, those sacrifices are worth it for the sense of well-being she gets. 'It really helps me to manage stress and keeps me feeling positive. To me, running is better than any antidepressant pill. It's a healthy, natural high.'

However, celebrity fitness trainer Dalton Wong, co-author of The Feelgood Plan, warns that over-exercising can be just as bad for the body as not exercising at all.

'You're always slightly injured and sore and your stress levels are high, because excess exercise overloads the nervous system and raises cortisol levels,' he says. 'It

can lead to burn-out, which happens when you wake up feeling exhausted with no energy.

'You know exercise has become an addiction when it becomes all-encompassing – when you don't go out and socialise because you need to do a certain fitness class.'

He says the key to achieving the 'high' exercise brings in a healthy way is moderation. 'Exercising two or three times a week to a level of exertion where you can't hold a conversation is good,' he says.

Tina Howe is also hooked on the euphoric exercise buzz. The 49-year-old, who lives in Egham, Surrey, with her 14-year-old daughter and runs her own hairdressing business, is so addicted she often does two or three classes a day.

'I go to the gym almost every day, and often twice a day – in the morning and evening,' she says.

'Often after a step class, body combat or spinning class I'll stay and do another one. I plan my clients around my workouts.'

'Sometimes I have to tell them I can't see them at a certain time because I want to do a class. The

high I get from working out makes me feel happier and less stressed and, recently, it's helped me through a break-up. When I'm down, it gives me a boost, so I've been going even more than usual.

'If I don't go, I get quite stroppy and anxious, which my friends and daughter find funny.'

**T**INA is so addicted, she continued to train even when she sustained an agonising injury last year. 'I had a painful inflammation in the arch of my foot,' she says. 'I carried on running and doing my classes, but eventually I went to the doctor, who told me to rest it for a few months. I



Living for the buzz TV presenter Lisa Vickery and Tina Howe (Inset)

Pictures: JN VISUALS / SONJA HORSMAN



couldn't bear the idea of giving up exercise, so instead I changed my routine. I stopped doing classes that put a lot of pressure on my feet and switched to doing more weights in the gym and using a cross-trainer.

'It took months to get better, but I tell myself it would have taken just as long if I'd done what the doctor said.'

Kate Nunn, 42, runs, swims or cycles most days in preparation for the triathlons she takes part in four times a year. A designer who lives with her partner in East London, Kate says exercising is about staying on an even keel.

'I've been exercising so long that I don't feel that "high" so much any more,' she says. 'It's only if I go on a particularly long, hard bike ride or run that I get it.'

'It's more about how I feel if I don't do it. If I go two or three days without exercise, my emotional well-being nosedives. So I make sure I'm always incorporating exercise into my day, such as cycling to and from work.'

'I make sure I go out with friends and do other things, though. I know I need to keep that balance.'

And as Dalton Wong says, there's nothing wrong with having a burning desire for exercise, as long as there's room for other passions. 'Exercise should enhance your life, not take over,' he says. 'Making it your only focus isn't healthy.'

Advice Britain's army of exercise addicts may want to heed.

**Look of the week: marble**

- Loia Rose scarf, £32.20, [johnlewis.com](http://johnlewis.com)
- Make-up bag, £13.50, [oliverbonas.com](http://oliverbonas.com)
- Dolce & Gabbana cat eye sunglasses, £122, [johnlewis.com](http://johnlewis.com)
- Heels, £115, [lkbennett.com](http://lkbennett.com)
- Watch, £115, [fossil.com](http://fossil.com)
- Rihanna Phillips phone case, £24, [silkfred.com](http://silkfred.com)
- Pleated dress, £34, [topshop.com](http://topshop.com)

Styling: AMY KESTER