

by Anna Maxted

DEEP tissue massage is usually considered a treat — but I now know it very much depends on the depth of tissue being massaged. Having my stomach area energetically kneaded, as if it were an unwieldy lump of dough, is far from relaxing.

But this is no normal massage, it's VOT (Visceral Osteopathy Technique), an emerging treatment that could well improve my circulation, digestion, breathing, posture and wellbeing. Plus — and this is the most appealing part — give me a flatter tummy.

The theory is that the connective tissue that covers the internal organs in the abdomen can tighten, reducing their mobility and causing digestive problems. Carefully stretching these fibres with a massage may increase blood supply to the area and stimulate the gut-to-brain connection — the signals the brain sends to the gut and vice versa, which prompt each organ do its job more effectively.

My deeper-than-deep massage is at the expert hands of osteopath Dr Iona Bramati, who believes that VOT may be particularly beneficial if you suffer from digestive problems, tension or stress.

Gut health is without doubt the hottest topic in the wellness world, with the clean-eating brigade long espousing the benefits of maintaining your good gut bacteria by eating the right food. But this is the first time I've heard of using osteopathy to improve gut health.

'Osteopathy is about creating space,' says Dr Bramati. And VOT is no different: it aims to optimise conditions internally for breathing and blood flow. If organs are less constricted, they move in synchronicity with the diaphragm during breathing, and with your skeleton and muscles as you walk or run.

I brace myself for some serious squashing and squishing as Dr Bramati starts to manipulate my mid-section.

'This is the ileocecal valve,' she says, poking into my stomach, 'the connection between the small and large intestines. It's often an area where you have quite a lot of irritation. If there's reflux it can cause problems and pain.'

SHE asks if I am finding the massage painful. I'm not, but it's certainly weird and slightly uncomfortable. It feels as if my insides are a handbag and she's searching for her keys. It takes some getting used to. I do let out an involuntary gasp as she focuses on the pancreatic area.

'In stimulating that area there's a good chance the function of the pancreas will be enhanced,' she says.

The pancreas plays an essential role in digestion, converting food into fuel and regulating blood sugar, so if I can make mine super-efficient, then why not?

Dr Bramati believes that just as our state of mind can impact our gut health, so our gut health can impact our state of mind.

Imagine a stressful job, she says. 'You slouch over your computer so your digestion is probably not great as you're compressing the abdominal area. You're also compressing the neck, creating tension in the back.'

It all sounds pretty familiar. Also, if you hunch, chances are you're not breathing properly, i.e. deeply from the diaphragm. She mimes quick, shallow breaths. Typically, we think

Can you massage away your muffin top?

Tummy rub:
Dr Bramati and Anna

Picture: JOHN GODWIN

of osteopathy as focused on the back, but Dr Bramati says: 'Mid-back pain may be because the rib cage and the diaphragm are too restricted, reducing the diaphragm's ability to open and close.'

'Working on the diaphragm, you'll get the breathing and the ribcage working in a better way, and decrease the use of the accessory muscles. Posture improves; everything works better.'

The gut itself is hugely important to our general wellbeing, with 90 per cent of feel-good hormone serotonin coming from it.

'If we don't look after our gut, it has mental health implications,' says Dr Bramati.

'We've neglected our gut for a long, long time. It's time for us to look after it — not only because we want a flat tummy, but if we

establish a healthy gut, then we establish a healthy mind.'

Scientists believe our emotions are often influenced by the nerves in our digestive tract. Dr Bramati notes that our 'gut instinct' should not be ignored.

THE feeling of butterflies in your stomach, for instance, is the stress response felt in the gut's neurons, as the body prepares for fight or flight.

Dr Bramati believes that manually stretching the stress receptors in the gut can stimulate them if they've become sluggish, improving the digestive process, relieving constipation and helping to detox the body.

She treats holistically, so before

'digging in' she asks about my medical history and habits — from falls and fractures to pregnancies and how much water I drink.

I tell her that by my third Caesarian section, I had adhesions — bands of fibrous tissue that can form between abdominal tissues and organs, often after surgery.

I've had back pain ever since, but it didn't occur to me that it could be related to the adhesions.

Dr Bramati tells me that 11 years on, it's too late to break these up, but she shows me how to gently pinch and lift my abdominal scar and twiddle the skin between my fingertips to help 'relieve' the adhesions. She believes it will improve circulation and lymphatic drainage in that area if I do this regularly at home.

She can tell on sight that I hauled around all three of my babies on my right hip: my pelvis has shifted to the point that I'm lopsided. She starts to address this 'structural problem' by manipulating my back.

VOT is a very physical experience. At one point, Dr Bramati uses her full weight to bend my leg and push it up towards my chest to improve circulation and drainage around the hip area.

I leave feeling lighter of heart if not particularly light of stomach. Dr Bramati recommends more than one treatment, so perhaps that elusive flat tummy would happen in time.

■ ibccare.co.uk

Is it just ME?

Or is there nothing
better than a
staycation?

EVERY year, millions of us are hypnotised into believing that a 'real' summer holiday *must* be one taken abroad. Unless we've toasted our skin in Turkey, got heat rash in Spain, been bitten by 1,000 mosquitoes in Italy, or had food poisoning in France, we feel hard done by.

So powerful is this mass delusion that many of us pour hundreds — if not thousands — of pounds into the pockets of airlines and rental companies.

For years, in the pursuit of Mediterranean or American sunshine, we drag our kids onto delayed planes, stinking ferries and hot cars and into rented rooms or holiday homes with terrible TV, lumpy beds and packed beaches. It's all massively stressful and, by the end, we'd need a holiday to get over our holiday.

We used to do the same, until one year, I got cancer.

*Delayed planes.
Hot cars. Lumpy
beds. By the end,
we'd need a
holiday to get
over our holiday*

While I lay in bed having hospital treatment, my husband took the kids and dog to the West Country for their summer break.

Suddenly, all the things they yearned for — huge, sandy beaches, fresh fish, good TV, flowery meadows and none of the pestilence of abroad — was there, in unblighted Blighty.

We've never looked back. With the pound down, and Europe more expensive as a result, this can seem like making a virtue out of necessity. But I do believe we need to think again about exploring the beauty of our own country.

Our beaches are less busy and, if you avoid the kind of pub that serves frozen chips, then British food (and drink) is fabulous. Travel abroad narrows the mind — but travel at home broadens it.

■ AMANDA'S new novel, *The Lie Of The Land*, is published by Little, Brown at £16.99

by Amanda Craig

What will £55 buy you?



PERFECT CURVES
Gorgeous hourglass vase, connectionsathome.co.uk



RETRO VIBES
Vintage bread bin, amara.com

CLASSIC CLOCK
Tell the time with Swiss railway efficiency, johnlewis.com



RED HOT
Enjoy your coffee in style with this Le Creuset cafetiere, selfridges.com



Styling: LIZ HEMMINGS