

Celebrity health check

NATALIE CASSIDY

THIS week: Actress and former *EastEnders* star Natalie Cassidy, 29.

Are you healthy and well?
Yes, in every way.

Anything at all that you're currently worried about, health-wise?

I've got polycystic ovaries, but it doesn't really affect me apart from making it harder for me to lose weight.

What is your biggest vice?
I smoke six or seven cigarettes a week. I want to knock it on the head.

What exercise do you do?
I go to my gym three times a week. I do cardio for 20 minutes, then weights and abs for an hour. Then I see a personal trainer for

boxing and resistance work. I love it.

Any self-help tips?
Getting up in the morning and being positive. Some people think it's unreal, but I can't help the way I am.

Anything hereditary in your family you'll need to watch out for?
There are heart problems in my family. My mum died from a heart attack and she had bowel cancer. My dad's had a triple by-pass and a heart attack.

Do you pop any pills?
I take a herbal supplement called Thisilyn Artichoke that's really helped with my bloating.

● Natalie uses Thisilyn Artichoke, available from Boots (£7.99 for 30 capsules). See thisilyn-artichoke.co.uk.

LET YOUR LIGHTER SIDE OUT



Have a laugh with MALTESERS® to help raise £1 million for Red Nose Day. Check out tomorrow's Sun to find out how YOU can get involved.



Why salt IS good for you

(But only if you inhale it)



By HELEN GILBERT

IT'S Friday afternoon and for the next hour my job is to relax.

A nigh-on impossible task for someone who struggles to sit still, compiles at least three lists a day and has the attention span of a gnat.

Even so, I'm stretched out on a recliner, magazine in hand, drawing in deep breaths of salty air as I listen to the cries of seagulls overhead and the gentle lapping of the ocean in the background.

A powdery, white shore stretches before me – but on closer inspection it's not sand, but salt.

A ton and a half of the stuff, shipped in from the Red Sea.

My stress-busting quest has not delivered me to a sun-drenched Caribbean island, but to a man-made "salt cave" in a clinic off a bustling high street in Bexleyheath, Kent.

Combat

I'm undergoing a £35 "salt therapy" session at one of the salt cave clinics that are beginning to pop up all over the UK.

The idea is that inhaling sterile salty air helps to manage and alleviate a range of health conditions including asthma, pneumonia, hay fever, cystic fibrosis, sinusitis, bronchitis, psoriasis, eczema and emphysema.

Widely used in eastern Europe, the treatment was discovered 200 years ago when it emerged that salt miners rarely suffered with respiratory disorders.

But I am here because halotherapy – as it is also known – is also said to relieve stress, boost wellbeing and combat sleep disorders.

The pure white salt is everywhere. On the floor, on the walls and on the ceiling.

And on top of all that, even more salt is pumped into the chamber throughout



SEASONED PRO... writer Helen Gilbert undergoes salt therapy

my session. Owner Dung Hoang stops by the chamber and explains that he opened the clinic with his wife Oksana last year.

The couple were inspired after being amazed at how salt therapy transformed the health of their asthmatic seven-year-old son Danny, seven.

The lad had also suffered repeated bouts of tonsillitis – which had led to doctors advising surgery to remove his tonsils or a six-month course of antibiotics.

Instead, his worried parents decided to try giving him sessions in a salt cave.

Dung said: "Now Danny is 95 per cent recovered from asthma and his tonsillitis has completely disappeared."

As he exits the room, I nervously glance around.

The lights dim and a special machine that grinds up dry rock salt and releases particles – which are invisible to the naked eye – begins to hum. According

to Dung, these particles penetrate deep into the respiratory system, and have a whole raft of benefits.

Their naturally antiseptic properties are said to help kill bacteria, while minerals including potassium and magnesium help reduce inflammation and clean out mucus blocking the airways.

Only a minuscule amount of the salt is actually absorbed into your body, the owners say.

So there are none of the problems that eating the stuff can cause, such as heart attacks and strokes.

As I sink deeper into my lounger, a TV screen starts beaming in images of bubbling brooks and lagoons, while a soundtrack of breaking waves and seagulls gently fills the air.

I'm certainly beginning to unwind.

I choose to just chill out and relax – although according to the clinic's website it's quite acceptable to flick through a

magazine or stick your nose into a novel while the salt works its magic.

An hour later I'm leaving the clinic feeling exhausted but only in a "good day beside the sea" sort of way.

Negative ions in salty air are said to boost our ability to absorb oxygen and balance serotonin levels, which can calm mood.

The main thing I was hoping for was an improvement in my terrible sleeping pattern.

I'm someone who routinely takes an hour to nod off and wakes up at least three times a night – sometimes for as long as an hour at a time.

The clinic recommends a course of sessions to combat such a problem – but I could not help hoping that my single visit would have at least a small effect.

So, at 11pm that night I climb into bed, praying that I'll fall quickly and peacefully into a blissful land of slumber.

Sadly it doesn't happen. An hour and a half later I'm still awake.

But when I do finally doze off I sleep like a log and wake up feeling remarkably fresh and energised.

However, at £35 per individual session the treatment is not cheap.

So next time I have to admit that I'll probably head to the coast and try that age-old remedy – a bracing walk by the sea.

● For more information on the Salt Cave Bexleyheath, phone 020 8166 4100 or visit saltcave.co.uk.

'Best ever night's sleep'

EMPHYSEMA sufferer Pauline Humphrey, would like to see the therapy prescribed on the NHS.

Before discovering the treatment, the former librarian, 62, from Greenwich, south east London, was on steroid inhalers and struggled to breathe. She has since halved her medication and taken up exercise. She says:

● The doctor put me on a course of steroid tablets which cleared my cough and I was told to manage my condition with two inhalers.

The side effects were horrendous – I struggled to sleep and suffered with terrible sweats, tummy cramps and a sore mouth.

On a short break to Edinburgh last year, my son and his fiancée surprised me with a session at a salt cave.

The treatment lasted an hour and was very relaxing. That evening I had one of the best

night's sleep I'd ever had so I researched a cave closer to home, signed up for 20 sessions and began going twice a week.

After the fifth session my husband, Adrian, said, "You're running up the stairs without even thinking about it."

With each trip to the cave my general health improved so I decided to halve my inhaler use.

When I eventually told my GP what I had done he just rolled his eyes but agreed it was better for me to be on less medication.

I was delighted with the salt cave sessions but disappointed that he refused to express an opinion on the therapy.

After all, steroids are not cheap and I can just fill in a form and get four inhalers at no cost to me because of my age.

I'd much rather the NHS pay half the cost of the salt cave treatment. ●

'I felt I had my life back'

CLARA BUFFONG has asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and hay fever. The 54-year-old, from Dagenham had 20 salt cave sessions on the NHS, which changed her life. She says:

● Most people take breathing for granted but for me every day is a struggle. Holding a conversation can leave me gasping for air and I can only walk up two stairs before I have to stop to catch my breath.

In 2011 I learned the NHS would pay £500 towards managing my COPD as part of a pilot Personal Health Budget so I had salt cave therapy at a clinic in Earsfield, London.

The sessions lasted an hour, and after each one I felt as though my airways had opened up.

I was able to breathe freely and sit and talk to people without making wheezing noises.

My pneumonia cleared up, my

asthma improved, I could taste food again and cut out antihistamines.

On the days I visited the cave, I only needed to use my nebuliser twice a day instead of four.

It was fantastic, I felt as though I'd been given my life back.

My chest consultant was so impressed with my progress he wrote letters supporting my treatment. But the funding was only for a limited time.

I couldn't afford to keep up the treatment and my health began to deteriorate. I'm now on 12 different types of medication, my immune system is low and I'm constantly fighting chest infections.

I understand that the Department of Health is going to provide funding again in 2014 for people with continuing problems – for me that time can't come soon enough. ●

'Baby battled for breath – now therapy hits infection'

FULL-time mum Fiona Perry, 46, of Bexleyheath, Kent, began using salt therapy after her son Luke Nagy-Perry had repeated bouts of bronchiolitis. Now aged 15 months, he was just three months old at the time. Single Fiona, pictured right with Luke, who also has a three-year-old daughter, Ava, says:

● Watching your baby struggling for breath is one of the worst things in the world. Luke had developed bronchiolitis, a lower respiratory tract infection.

He had a cold and cough, which made it difficult for him to feed.

He was using up an awful lot of energy, so we were in and out of A&E. Although Luke managed to clear the bronchiolitis, he succumbed again four weeks later – but this time he was left with a wheeze.

After that, whenever he picked up a cold or cough from nursery, it would turn into a chest infection and he'd be left rasping.

The children's dad, who is Hungarian, suggested trying salt cave therapy,

which is popular there. Luke was nine months old when I called up the Bexleyheath Salt Cave to enquire – and they invited him down for a free treatment session. The children's room was nicely furnished. It had lots of toys and a Mickey Mouse cartoon was playing on the big screen.

There was also a travel cot inside and my daughter, Ava, came with us. The children played happily in the room for an hour. That night, Luke slept right through without coughing or waking up. I booked a package of 20 sessions which made it easier.

With each session his wheeze improved and when he next caught a cold it didn't turn into a chest infection. Now I use the therapy as a preventative measure, taking him twice a week when he has a nasty cough or a cold.

It reduces the need for antibiotics. It is the most fantastic natural healing. If I could afford a yearly pass, I'd buy one. ●



THE healthometer

What's hot and what's not in the world of wellbeing



Hot

ASPIRIN – women who take aspirin over a five-year period have a 30 per cent lower chance of developing skin cancer – including malignant melanoma, say experts in the United States.

Hot

BETROOT – contains high levels of nitrates to help boost stamina. A study found that adults who drank 500ml of beetroot juice a day could exercise 16 per cent longer than other health juice drinkers.

Hot

COCONUT OIL – a daily dose of coconut oil could stave off Alzheimer's disease, according to scientists at Oxford University. The oil contains a rare type of fat that the brain absorbs easily.

Hot

SHAVING – your head could be good for your career. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania said a shaved head gives the appearance of strength and leadership ability.

Hot

ANTIBIOTICS – Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies has warned that growing resistance to antibiotics could leave millions vulnerable to deadly diseases such as C.difficile and tuberculosis.

Hot

Cold

MARRIAGE – may not be as healthy as once thought. Ohio University studies into the deaths of 24,000 married people show they might have overestimated their health – and not seen enough of the doctor.

Cold

BAREFOOT RUNNING – experts are wary of this trend. Those who use five-toed running shoes suffered an increased risk of injury to bones in the foot and stress fractures.

Cold

PROCESSED MEAT – is to blame for one death in 30 according to a Europe-wide study from Oxbridge scientists. The experts recommended eating no more than 20g of the meat – or one rasher of bacon – per day.

Cold

Cold

OFFICIALS' VERDICT...

DESPITE many salt therapy success stories there is currently little clinical evidence to support the claims.

Public health watchdog NICE does not recommend it as a treatment for respiratory diseases, while a Department of Health spokesman says there is "insufficient trial evidence" to show that it may benefit people with asthma.

Yet the Government has given the green light for funding to help people manage certain long-term conditions – such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – in this way under the Personal Health Budgets scheme, from April 2014.

A Department of Health spokesman says: "Personal Health Budgets can include treatments and services not traditionally provided by the NHS, like salt cave therapy."