

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES



The use of complementary and alternative therapies (CAM) is common by people with MS because often they feel that current approaches do not provide the whole answer to a complex illness. CAMS can be a way of taking control of treatment and preventative strategies. So long as they do no harm, there are many therapies worth looking at. They should be used in conjunction with conventional medicine and treatments.

What are complementary and alternative therapies?

CAM is the name given to a broad group of health-related therapies and disciplines which are not considered to be part of mainstream medical care.

Other terms used to describe CAM include 'holistic' or 'natural' medicine. The term 'natural' can be misleading. Many complementary and alternative medicines are processed and are as 'unnatural' as any other drugs, and about 25% of medicines produced by the pharmaceutical industry are derived in some way from natural products such as herbs. The term

'holistic' refers to those therapies that look beyond the physical and address emotional and spiritual issues too.

Types of complementary and alternative therapies

Commonly used therapies include:

Acupuncture uses fine needles to stimulate invisible lines of energy (called meridians) running beneath the surface of the body. According to Chinese philosophy, health is dependent on the body's motivating energy (qi - pronounced chee) moving in a smooth and balanced way through these meridians. If this becomes unbalanced then illness may result. By inserting fine needles the acupuncturist can stimulate the body's own healing response and help restore natural balance. Acupuncture is also commonly used to alleviate pain.

Aromatherapy is the controlled use of essential oils to promote health and well-being. Aromatherapy has become a more common form of treatment in recent years for pain management. The most common way of using the essential oils is through

massage; however essential oils can be used in a variety of other ways such as inhalation, vaporisation, in the bath and added to body lotions.

The principles of **traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)** are based on energy flow in the body. Advocates of TCM suggest that maintaining the natural balance of the body's energy flow can prove therapeutic in long-term conditions such as MS.

Different elements of TCM, most often including acupuncture and traditional Chinese herbs, are brought together to restore the flow of energy (qi or chi) in the body. Diet and nutrition, exercise, stress reduction, counselling, and massage therapy are also used by some TCM practitioners.

Homoeopathy employs the basic principle of 'let like cure like'. This is based on the theory that individuals who have an illness or a condition might be helped by substances that produce similar symptoms when given to healthy individuals.

Homoeopathic remedies contain a substance in an extremely diluted form. Many remedies are so diluted as to no longer contain a single molecule of the original substance and are therefore generally safe.

In a typical **hypnotherapy** session, the hypnotist will induce a deep state

of relaxation which encourages a heightened susceptibility to suggestion. The therapist will then make suggestions that are of therapeutic value to the individual with the expectation that the individual's thought and behavioural patterns will be sufficiently modified on waking to effect some positive changes.

Limited research suggests that hypnosis-induced relaxation can help reduce anxiety and pain.

Massage is used by some people for relief of musculoskeletal symptoms of MS. It appears to help general well-being and may reduce depression.

There are various types of **meditation**, - a mental technique that requires inward focus and mental concentration. An individual may choose to practice meditation independently, or attend meditation or yoga classes where various techniques may be taught. Practiced correctly, meditation can induce a state of calm and mental clarity and improve stress, anxiety, depression and pain.

Reflexology is an alternative therapy that involves stimulating points on the soles of the feet to induce therapeutic effects in different parts of the body and is a relatively safe therapy with no known serious side effects.

Reflexology can help with paraesthesia (abnormal sensations such as pins and needles), urinary symptoms, muscle strength and spasticity.

Reiki is a Japanese word meaning 'universal life energy' - a concept of energy flows through the body. A trained practitioner can alter the energy flows through the body by placing his/her hands in a series of positions, on or over the body. Each position may be held for several minutes. The whole body is treated rather than a specific symptom. Reiki has been shown to improve pain and depression.

Tai Chi is a form of gentle exercise that combines deep breathing and relaxation techniques with slow, graceful movements. It can be carried out individually or in groups. Because Tai Chi is largely based on technique, it does not require great strength or flexibility.

Long-term Tai Chi practice can have favourable effects on the promotion of balance control, flexibility and cardiovascular fitness and reduced the risk of falls in older people and reduce pain, stress and anxiety.

Yoga uses a combination of physical postures, breathing exercises, relaxation and meditation to try and

reach optimal physical and mental health. Deep relaxation and the strengthening of muscle control through yoga can be extremely beneficial for people with MS.

Ineffective or potentially harmful therapies

Herbal treatments that stimulate the immune system such as echinacea should be avoided as they can make MS symptoms worse. Other herbal treatments can be potentially harmful such as black cohosh, skullcap, comfrey because they can produce serious liver and kidney toxicity.

Remember, just because it's natural does not mean that it is good for you.

Other treatments like dental amalgam replacement, bee sting treatment, oxygen therapy have little or no data to support their use.

How do I find a practitioner?

Some people find a practitioner via their doctor, MS nurse or other health care professional or you can look for a practitioner independently. In either case, it is important to do your research. Check that they are properly trained, have qualifications, and whether they are a member of a regulatory or professional

organisation. The Australian Traditional Medicine Society has a website that can locate practitioners who are members.

<http://www.atms.com.au/index.asp>.

Important questions to ask

Alternative therapy can be helpful for MS, but some treatments can be ineffective, costly, and even dangerous. The best way to evaluate your options is to become educated. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the treatment?
- What does it involve?
- How does it work?
- Why does it work?
- Are there any risks?
- What are the side effects?
- Is it effective? (Ask for evidence or proof!)
- How much does it cost?

Once you answer these questions, decide whether the benefits outweigh the risks.

Make sure your health and wallet are protected. Here are some tips:

- Do not take claims at face value. Talk to others in a support group, your family, and friends. Although they may not always be supportive, they can help you make an educated, objective

decision.

- Discuss the therapy with your doctor so he or she can discuss possible interactions or side effects with your current treatment.
- Talk to others who have used the therapy. Ask them what their experiences have been. Do not go solely on testimonials from the care provider or product manufacturer.
- Research the provider's background. Determine how long they have been providing this therapy, what credentials they have, and what their philosophy of treatment is.
- Avoid providers who refuse or are reluctant to work with your doctor. Be sure that the provider is willing to refer patients to a conventional doctor when necessary.
- Make sure you know the total cost of the treatment up front. Some therapies are not covered by health insurance.

Warning signs

Like anything else, let the buyer beware! Here are some things to be alert to:

Promotion: Be cautious if products or providers are promoted through telemarketers,

direct mailings, infomercials, ads disguised as valid news articles, or ads in the back of magazines

Big claims: If a provider or product claims to be a "cure" for MS or makes other outrageous claims, be cautious

Source: Be wary if the product is only being offered through one manufacturer

Ingredients: Make sure all of the

active ingredients are listed. Do not trust "secret formulas"

Testimonials: Testimonials are only given by those who are satisfied with the product, so beware, especially if the terms "paid endorsement" are used. Be cautious if testimonials are given by people who are only listed by initials, locations, or first names.

If you are interested in more information:

The Society has more information sheets included in the Healthy Living Series as well as a Managing MS and Symptoms series. Please see the website for more details.

References

MS Trust (UK)

<http://www.mstrust.org.uk/atoz/cam.jsp>

MS Society UK

http://www.mssociety.org.uk/downloads/MS_Essentials_18_Complementary_&_Alternative_medicine_0210_-_web.c5e481ae.pdf

MSIF

http://www.msif.org/en/resources/msif_resources/msif_publications/ms_in_focus/index.html

Multiple Sclerosis Resource Centre (MSRC)

Alternative therapies http://www.msrc.co.uk/downloads/choices_alttherapies.pdf

National Multiple Sclerosis Society (US)

Momentum Summer 09 CAM Unconventional therapies for stress and anxiety
<http://www.nationalmssociety.org/multimedia-library/momentum-magazine/back-issues/momentum-summer-09/index.aspx>

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