

ARTHRITIS NEW ZEALAND

ENABLING A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

KAIPONAPONA AOTEAROA

Te whakapiki i te kounga ora

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES



www.arthritis.org.nz



COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES AND ARTHRITIS

Complementary therapies have become more popular and more widely available over the last few years. Conventional treatment is safe and effective for most people, but drugs and surgery cannot always fully control the symptoms of arthritis. A recent UK study found that the most common complaints taken to complementary practitioners were problems with persistent pain. This is an issue which conventional medicine finds difficult to manage.

It is important that you don't regard conventional and complementary treatments as being incompatible and in opposition to each other. There is seldom any adverse interaction between these two forms of treatment, but if in doubt, discuss it with both prescribers.

This booklet will help you decide whether complementary therapies could help your arthritis.

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WHAT ARE COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES?

There are a wide variety of complementary therapies. They range from ancient systems of medicine, such as acupuncture, homoeopathy and herbalism to treatments such as massage and aromatherapy. They are called 'complementary' when they have not traditionally been used in conventional medicine. However this is changing.

Different complementary therapies have different philosophies and practices, but most share a common view of health and healing.

Complementary therapies emphasise 'wellness' and that wellness comes from a balance between the body, the mind and the environment. Illness happens when there is an 'imbalance' between these factors.

Complementary therapies concentrate on the whole person – the so-called 'holistic' approach. Each person is treated as a unique individual who has his or her own 'inner resources' to fight and overcome illness.

The 'holistic' approach of complementary therapies means you usually have to make 'lifestyle' changes (i.e. diet, exercise and positive thinking). This may be a key to their continuing success with those who have tried them.

We all know that the body heals itself, that cuts and wounds heal and that the body cells routinely replace themselves. Complementary therapists believe that this self-healing is the basis of all healing. Complementary therapy aims to help the individual to get well and then stay healthy.

WHAT COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES ARE THERE?

ACUPRESSURE

Acupressure has been described as acupuncture without the needles. Its roots are in traditional Chinese medicine and it works on the same principle of stimulating points along the "channels" where life energy (chi) flows. Fingers, thumbs and even feet and knees are used to stimulate acupoints. It can also be used as a self-treatment at home for minor ailments such as headaches.



ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is often used in physiotherapy and pain relief, so it may already be part of your treatment. Based upon a 2000-year-old system rooted in Chinese medicine, it involves inserting fine needles into specific points of the body realigning the flow of energy (chi). It seems to relieve pain by diverting or changing the painful sensations which are sent to the brain from damaged tissues and also by stimulating the body's own painkillers (the endorphins and

encephalins). Acupuncture is generally believed to be useful as a form of pain relief, but it can not slow down or stop the disease process. Acupuncture may help someone who cannot tolerate drugs through a painful episode, or it may be used to manage pain on a long-term basis.



THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The Alexander technique is focused on how we use our bodies in everyday life and teaches people new ways of using their body to improve balance, co-ordination and awareness. By learning to stand and move correctly, people can ease stress on their body and alleviate conditions that are made worse by poor posture. It must be practiced regularly in order to successfully change a lifetime of bad habits.



AROMATHERAPY

Plant extracts have been used for health and well-being for many centuries. In aromatherapy, the essential oils are inhaled, massaged into the skin, or used in the bath. Each oil has its own articular properties – some are invigorating, some relaxing and some act as anti-inflammatory. Pure essential oils can be used at home and are available from pharmacies, health food shops and mail order. Rosemary, chamomile, marjoram and juniper oils are all thought to be good for muscular or joint aches and pains.

CHIROPRACTIC

Chiropractic is one of the complementary therapies which has gained some respect within the medical community. It aims to improve mobility and relieve pain by focusing on the mechanical problems in the joints, especially the spine. Chiropractors use their hands to adjust joint in the spine and other parts of the body where movement is restricted.

Chiropractic treatment should not be given where there is any inflammation (e.g. during a flare-up of rheumatoid arthritis), infection, or if ankylosing spondylitis or osteoporosis is suspected.

COPPER BRACELETS

Many people with arthritis wear copper bracelets; some research has shown that people with arthritis do not have enough copper in their bodies for normal health. There is no scientific research supporting the use of copper bracelets.



DIET

A good diet is essential for healthy living, and is a very important part of many of the therapies listed in this booklet. A well planned diet can help some people with arthritis. Although a dramatic improvement is unlikely, some people find that changing their diet allows them to reduce the conventional medication they are using. More information about diet in general is given in the Arthritis New Zealand pamphlet "Diet".

DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS:

FISH OILS AND OTHER OILS.

Several recent studies have indicated that certain kinds of oil in the diet help some people with arthritis. These oils contain essential fatty acids (EFAs). Essential means that the body cannot make them for itself, and must get them from food or food supplements. The body uses EFAs to make chemicals which control inflammation. There are two groups of EFAs:

- Omega-3 is found mostly in oily fish (such as tuna, kippers, pilchards, sardines, mackerel and salmon) and in some plant seed oils and nuts.
- Omega-6 comes mostly from plant seed oils like evening primrose oil or sunflower oil.



Omega-3 EFAs, particularly those found in oily fish, are thought to be beneficial for people with arthritis, particularly those with an inflammatory type of arthritis (such as rheumatoid arthritis, reactive arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, polymyalgia rheumatica, systemic lupus erythematosus or Sjögren's syndrome).

Gout is also an inflammatory form of arthritis, but people with gout should avoid oily fish because of the high purine content.

There is also evidence that omega-3 EFAs help protect against heart disease.

One way of taking omega-3 EFAs is by eating oily fish. Another is by taking fish oil capsules, which you can buy in most pharmacies and health food shops. Look for the brands that are high in the EFAs: EPA and DHA. EPA is particularly good as this essential fatty acid has been shown to have the anti-inflammatory effect. As fish oils have a blood thinning effect, people on blood thinning medication should check with their doctor or pharmacist.



The amount recommended for therapeutic purposes is 3,600mg of omega-3 daily. Omega-6 EFAs and cod liver oil are not thought to be of benefit in arthritis.



GLUCOSAMINE HYDROCHLORIDE/SULFATE

Glucosamine is a part of human cartilage. Studies have indicated that dietary supplements with glucosamine provide symptomatic benefits. It may also help decrease the rate of disease progression in patients with osteoarthritis.



Research suggests that our natural glucosamine production declines with age, contributing to the progression of osteoarthritis in old age. Oral glucosamine may help control a variety of symptoms of osteoarthritis. Glucosamine has mild anti-inflammatory properties, provides some degree of pain relief and improved function in people who experience regular pain.



Glucosamine supplements are made from sea crustacean shells, so people with seafood allergies should not take the supplement. If you have diabetes, monitor your blood sugar levels closely as glucosamine could increase insulin resistance and you may need to adjust the amount of insulin you take. Check with your doctor or diabetes nurse. Dosage adjustments may be necessary for insulin or oral hypoglycaemic agents.

- *The amount recommended for therapeutic purposes is 1500mg – 2000mg daily.*

CHONDROITIN SULFATE

Chondroitin sulfate is part of the carbohydrate family which is involved in the structure and function of cartilage. Chondroitin may also have an anti-inflammatory action and provide pain relief for those with osteoarthritic joints. Chondroitin helps cartilage withstand compression and plays an important role in the lubrication and nutrition of the joint. Chondroitin sulphate is said to have ability to increase the rate of bone repair.

The use of both glucosamine and chondroitin together has been found to be more effective in slowing down the progression of cartilage degeneration than either substance being used alone.



HERBAL MEDICINE

Herbal remedies are very popular with some people who believe that they help to cure different forms of arthritis. Clinical trials have found some benefits, but there is not yet enough information about any specific herb to be absolutely certain about their effects. If herbal remedies are going to work, you usually need to take them for about three months before you feel the full benefit. They are usually safe (non-toxic) but they may sometimes, like drugs, cause side-effects. These side-effects can include nervous depression, irritability, sleeplessness, and even aches and pains in the muscles or joints. If you are thinking of using these remedies, make sure you discuss this with your medical practitioner.



GREEN-LIPPED MUSSEL EXTRACT

The results of recent studies have found *Perna canaliculus* (The Green-lipped mussel of New Zealand) may be effective for treating symptoms of osteoarthritis including pain and inflammation, therefore potentially leading to improvement in function and quality of life. The green-lipped mussel is very well tolerated, however caution is advised for those with seafood allergies. Green lipped mussel may also increase the risk of bleeding with warfarin so consult your healthcare professional before commencing treatment.



HOMOEOPATHY

Homoeopathy is a 200-year-old system of medicine. It is based upon the Law of Similars (let like be cured by like – so a treatment for nausea might be a substance that can make you feel sick). Homoeopathic remedies need to be prescribed on an individual basis, so there is no particular remedy for arthritis, but rather for the individual who may have arthritis.

Homoeopathic remedies are readily available over the counter in health food shops and pharmacies. But we advise that you contact a qualified practitioner to treat any long-standing illness like arthritis. You must also be prepared to give the treatment time to work, sometimes up to 6 months. Homoeopathy usually also requires a change in lifestyle, which could include changing your diet, more relaxation or exercise, to complement the treatment. Medically qualified homoeopaths can also use orthodox medicine if they wish, as well as the medicines they use in homoeopathy. They can prescribe homoeopathy in a truly complementary manner.





HYDROTHERAPY



Hydrotherapy allows people with arthritis to exercise the joints and muscles while being supported by warm water. The temperature of the water assists in relaxing the muscles and easing the pain in the joints, making it easier to relax. As the water supports your weight the range of movement in your joints should increase and muscle strength should improve.

MAGNETIC THERAPY

It has been suggested that certain types of magnetic field can help speed up healing and reduce pain in muscular complaints. Physiotherapists use equipment which produces a pulsed magnetic field for this purpose. You may also have seen products such as magnetic bracelets and mattresses advertised. These products should not be used by anyone who has a heart pacemaker fitted. We currently do not know if the use of magnetism can help arthritis.

MASSAGE

As a therapy, massage can loosen stiff muscles by using gentle, soothing and kneading movements, and improve the tone of slack muscles using firmer movements. Massage can also increase the flow of blood and lymph through the body and ease tension. On an emotional level, a good massage leaves you feeling relaxed and cared for.

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SAFETY CHECKLIST

If you decide to try a complementary therapy, the following checklist will help ensure your treatment is reliable and safe.

- Ask your GP if they can refer you.
- Ask your complementary therapist how much the treatment will cost and how long it will take.
- Find out if the therapist is a member of a professional body.
- Find out if they have insurance if something goes wrong.
- Ask about their training and how long they have been practising.
- Beware of anyone who suggests you stop taking prescribed medication.
- Don't stop taking prescribed medication without talking to your GP/specialist.
- Tell your complementary therapist of any prescribed medications you are taking.
- Tell your GP/specialist about any complementary therapies you are using.

Contact your local Arthritis New Zealand Centre

- Ring our toll free number 0800 663 463

Visit the Arthritis New Zealand website

www.arthritis.org.nz

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