

Healthy ageing & lifestyle

Fact Sheet No.10

Pain: Part 3

Alternative therapies

The purpose of this fact sheet is to give a very brief description of some of the alternative therapies which may provide some relief from pain.

Definitions

Alternative therapy is a term used to describe a treatment which is used in place of conventional therapy; this usually incurs a financial cost to the user.

Complimentary therapy or medicine is the term used when a treatment is used in conjunction with conventional medicine; which again may incur a financial cost for the user.

If you are considering the use of an alternative therapy you should inform your GP at the outset, which is particularly important if you are already taking a prescribed medication for pain relief. You should discuss your intentions with the GP, or a Pharmacist, in the first instance to see if they have any advice to offer. If you have been experiencing chronic pain for a long period of time then it is likely that a particular drug therapy will be the mainstay of your treatment to this point, and the fact you are now willing to try an alternative therapy means you may feel that you have probably reached the end of the road with conventional medicines.

Sourcing a Therapist

Top tip

Do your research: Research both the therapy and the therapist. Is your chosen therapy appropriate and safe for you? Whatever alternative therapy you decide upon, always seek out a fully qualified practitioner with a nationally recognised qualification; a fancy plaque on the door and numerous certificates festooning the office is not necessarily a good sign!

Word of mouth is usually the best recommendation.

When you first made contact (over the phone), did they listen to your requirements and what you hope to achieve, and were they able to answer your questions to your satisfaction?

Your gut feelings are often right.

Beware of unrealistic goals, and promises.

Do not discontinue your conventional medicines without gaining the advice of your GP, they could be vital for your health.

Benefits of using an alternative therapist

The therapist is a specialist in their field.

The approach they take will probably be holistic, taking a thorough history of your condition as well as your general health.

They will have more time to allow you to fully explain your pain issues.

Questions you need to ask yourself

- Do you understand the cost involved, have you had this properly explained to you?
- Can you commit financially to long-term therapy sessions if that is what is required?
- What is the cancellation policy? You won't want to pay for sessions you can't attend.
- Is the building accessible to wheelchair users or those who have difficulty climbing stairs?
- Is there parking close by?
- Do I need someone to accompany me on each visit?

What can the NHS offer?

Most forms of alternative therapy are not funded by the NHS but there may be exceptions such as acupuncture for a limited number of sessions. GPs are now able to prescribe services such as talking therapies, so-called social prescribing, which can also include exercise classes and art-based activities.

Therapies

Acupuncture

One of the main uses of this ancient Chinese practice is for pain relief. It involves the insertion of fine needles along specific points on the body called meridians. Acupuncture can help to release the flow of the body's energy or 'chi' by stimulating one or more of the 14 energy pathways. It is thought the needles stimulate the body to produce endorphins, the body's natural pain killers, which is particularly beneficial if you experience joint or muscle pain, or suffer conditions such as fibromyalgia.



Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is the use of diluted essential oils that are massaged into the body. Common herbs which are used include lavender, tea tree and chamomile. It is very important you source a qualified aromatherapist because in the wrong hands some potentially dangerous side effects can occur.

Chiropractic treatment

Chiropractic treatment is often sought for neck and back pain, and headaches. It is also used to treat cartilage, ligament and tendon issues: the chiropractor will take your medical history and physically examine you, and a number of diagnostic tests are available to help with the proper diagnosis of your condition. Each session will last 30 minutes or more and you may need several of these, so you will need to ascertain that this treatment is suitable for you as it is possible, though rare, that manipulation of the spine can result in unwanted side effects.

Cranio-sacral Therapy

This therapy is used to treat a multitude of problems including muscle, joint and neurological problems. It is a non-invasive light touch therapy that can be deeply relaxing, and it may require several sessions.

Homeopathy

Homeopathic medicines are made from very small amounts of the active ingredient; they are non-additive and have no dangerous side effects. The treatment does not interfere with any conventional medicine and should be seen as complimentary and not as an alternative. A consultation with a medical doctor who is trained in homeopathy will give you the best of both worlds; be advised this treatment is no longer available on the NHS. Homeopathy takes a holistic approach and can be helpful in treating chronic conditions such as arthritis and chronic fatigue syndrome (words taken from <https://homeopathy-uk.org>).

Hypnotherapy

The main focus of hypnotherapy is relaxation and letting go of distracting thoughts. You can learn self-hypnosis, which could be a useful addition to your armoury of aids to manage pain.

Osteopathy

Osteopathy can help to reduce pain in chronic conditions by using a range of massage methods and gentle manipulation. It is particularly beneficial when used to treat painful and swollen joints, muscles and ligaments. An osteopath will probably give you exercises to do at home, and you may need more than one session.

Pilates, Yoga and Tai chi

Gentle, controlled exercise acts as a natural pain-killer. If you attend classes you must tell the instructor of your limitations and what specifically you are trying to achieve from the sessions.

Top tip

Take a multi-disciplinary approach to chronic pain, involving the appropriate healthcare professionals, self-help, family, friends and peer support.

Summary

Developing a positive coping strategy that works for you, and a mindset of managing pain rather than seeking a permanent 'cure' (which may be difficult to achieve), is key.

Support organisation

Pain support

<https://painsupport.co.uk>

Disclaimer

The information and opinions shared on this website are based on my personal experience of working in the health sector and research I have carried out whilst writing articles; it is of a general nature and should not be used as a substitute for seeking medical advice. My aim is to ensure that this information is accurate and kept up to date, but you should always consult the appropriate healthcare professionals if you have a concern about your health.

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