

## Therapies

Acupuncture | Art Therapy | Counselling | Healing Imagery | Massage | Meditation and Mindfulness Music Therapy | Nordic Walking | Physical Activity Qigong | **Reflexology** | Relaxation | Shiatsu | Yoga



In **reflexology** the thumb and fingers are used to press areas of the feet or hands, thought to be connected to organs, glands and other parts of the body.

Reflexology may be beneficial to many conditions, helping to reduce stress and promote relaxation. People who have had reflexology report benefits, such as relaxation and reduced anxiety.

There is growing evidence that reflexology can help reduce pain and anxiety associated with cancer and its treatments. Recent evidence, though limited, suggests that reflexology can also reduce fatigue and improve mood and quality of life. Reflexology is considered safe when practised by a trained therapist who has experience of treating people with cancer.

#### Information on reflexology

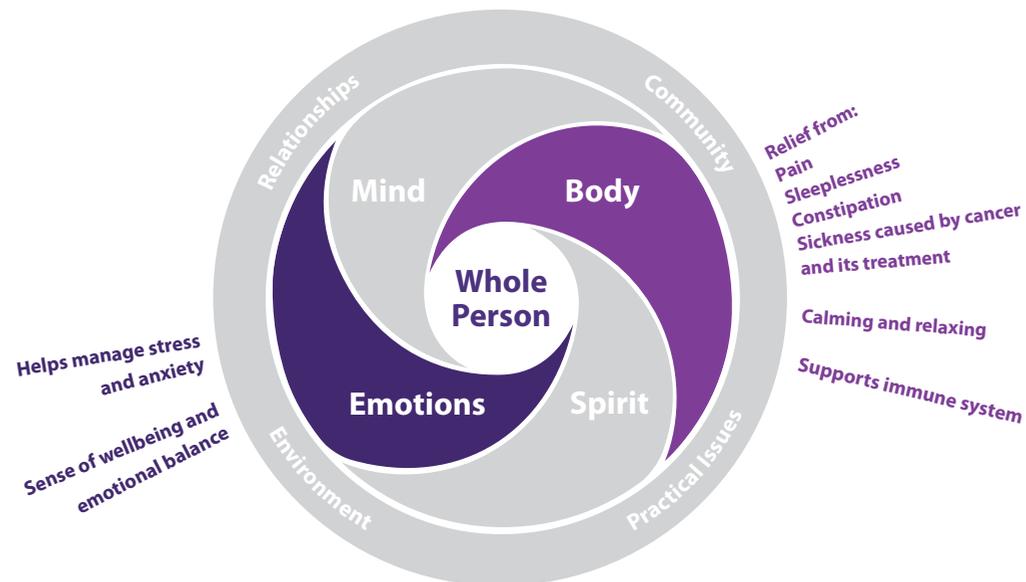
This evidence-based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about reflexology, one of a range of complementary therapies available to support people with cancer. If you would like more information on how to access the range of services Penny Brohn UK provides, please contact our Helpline on 0303 3000 118. We are able to provide our services free of charge, thanks to the charitable donations and voluntary contributions which fund our work.

#### What do people who have tried reflexology say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can provide information from a personal perspective, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone.

Three studies report positive experiences of reflexology, including relaxation and reduced tension and anxiety. In one study people reported an improvement in physical symptoms, but the other two studies did not find this to be true for most respondents. One study compared reflexology to foot massage and found that people had similar experiences with both.

### Reflexology and *The Bristol Whole Life Approach*



**This adaptation of *The Bristol Whole Life Approach* wheel shows the areas that reflexology can help with, according to providers.**

(Please note that these are not the claims of Penny Brohn UK.)

#### What happens in an reflexology session?

- During the first session the reflexologist will ask you some questions about your medical history, lifestyle and health. The reflexologist will use this to help decide which areas on your feet to treat.
- You will be asked to take off your shoes and socks and sit in a reclining chair, or lie on a treatment table, so that the therapist can examine and treat your feet. Some therapists may treat your hands as well.
- The therapist will start by gently massaging your foot to help you relax. Then they use their fingers and thumbs to apply pressure to specific points of the feet. Some therapists use oils or lotions to lubricate the

skin and may add aromatherapy oils. Pressure in some areas may feel sensitive or uncomfortable, but should not be painful.

- Reflexology sessions are usually 30 minutes to an hour long and a course of treatment normally lasts for six to eight sessions, though this may be extended.

#### More about reflexology

Modern Western reflexology is a therapy where pressure is applied to specific areas of the feet and sometimes the hands or ears. It is thought that these areas are linked to parts of the body which respond to this pressure. Pressure to the reflex points may stimulate or restore a flow of energy along channels. Reflexology aims to release tensions, relieve stress and illness and encourage healing.

There is anecdotal evidence which suggests that practices similar to reflexology were used in ancient Egypt, India and China<sup>1</sup>. Modern reflexology stems from the "Zone Therapy" work of William Fitzgerald, an American ear, nose and throat specialist working in the early 20th century. He found that pressure applied to one area of the body relieved disease elsewhere and concluded that the body is divided into 10 vertical "zones", each ending in a different part of the foot.

Eunice Ingham, a nurse and physiotherapist, refined and revised this concept in the 1930s. She developed a map of the body's structures, organs and glands on the foot and changed the name to "reflexology".

#### Is reflexology safe?

If practised by a qualified and appropriately experienced reflexologist, reflexology is considered to be safe. Very few side effects or problems associated with reflexology have been reported. A few people experience mild side effects, such as allergy to lubricants, fatigue, needing the toilet more often, light-headedness, tender feet or flu-like symptoms.

Reflexology is not recommended if you have recent or persistent foot conditions or injuries, wounds, ulcers, gout or vascular disease of the feet/legs. If the site of your cancer is on your foot or leg, reflexology may not be appropriate. Let your reflexologist know about any medical conditions, including any bone metastases, you may have before you start.

## Are there any legal issues?

There are currently no laws to govern reflexology. However there are a number of trustworthy organisations who certify reflexologists and support voluntary regulation.

## What is the evidence on reflexology?

There is growing, but not yet conclusive evidence to support reflexology as being effective in reducing cancer-related pain and anxiety. There is mixed or too little information to make a clear conclusion about benefits, including reduction of fatigue and improved mood and quality of life. Better research with larger numbers of people is needed to confirm current results.

A full list of references and an extended summary of the research literature is available upon request from our Helpline.

All rights reserved. © Penny Brohn UK 2018.

Penny Brohn UK is the trading name of Penny Brohn Cancer Care, a registered charity (no. 284881) and a company registered in England (no.1635916).

EBIS ID: Reflexology EBISv5. Literature search completed: 10 2015.  
With thanks to The James Tudor Foundation.

Sheet published: 06 2018  
Review Date: 06 2019

[www.pennybrohn.org.uk](http://www.pennybrohn.org.uk)  
charity no. 284881



## Contact us

**Helpline: 0303 3000 118**  
**Weekdays 9.30am to 5.00pm**  
**(24-hour answerphone)**

**Email: [helpline@pennybrohn.org.uk](mailto:helpline@pennybrohn.org.uk)**

**Penny Brohn UK**  
**Chapel Pill Lane, Pill, Bristol BS20 0HH**

## Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

## Disclaimer:

While we make every effort to use up-to-date and reliable sources, we cannot accept liability for errors in the sources that we use and also cannot guarantee to find all the information relevant to your enquiry or request. All responsibility for interpretation of and action upon that information rests with you. This information and advice is offered on the understanding that if you intend to support your treatment with complementary or alternative approaches, then it is advisable to consult your medical team to ensure that they have a complete understanding of your situation and the complementary or alternative approach that you are considering.

## Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer

**Cancer Research UK**      Tel: 0808 800 4040  
[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

**Macmillan Cancer Support**      Tel: 0808 808 0000  
[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

**NHS 111**      Tel: 111  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## More information on complementary therapies

**NHS Evidence**      [www.evidence.nhs.uk](http://www.evidence.nhs.uk)  
**CAM Cancer**      [www.cam-cancer.org/CAM-Summaries](http://www.cam-cancer.org/CAM-Summaries)

## Organisations that represent reflexology

**the Association of Reflexologists**  
Tel: 01823 351010 | [www.aor.org.uk](http://www.aor.org.uk)

**The British Reflexology Association**  
Tel: 01886 821207 | [www.britreflex.co.uk](http://www.britreflex.co.uk)