Complementary Therapies

Evidence-based information to help you self-manage your cancer experience
Complementary therapies are used alongside, and to support, conventional treatment. They can play an important role in relieving stress, alleviating side-effects of your treatment and generally helping you cope with living with cancer. Complementary therapies can include:

- Body work such as massage and shiatsu
- Acupuncture, reflexology, and energy therapies such as healing and reiki.

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

How to use this booklet
This sheet is split into sections to help you get the information you need to start exploring different complementary therapies. We’ve included information about cost and safety of these therapies as well as quotes from people who have tried them.

Contents

- Acupuncture 4-7
- Healing 8-12
- Massage 13-16
- Reflexology 17-19
- Shiatsu 20-22
- Further support 23
- Contact us 24
About acupuncture

Acupuncture is a Traditional Chinese Medicine. It uses very thin needles inserted into the skin at various points on the body to stimulate the flow of energy, known as Qi, along pathways within the body, known as meridians. Specific locations along the meridian pathways are known as acupressure points or acupoints.

There is good evidence that acupuncture is effective in treating chemotherapy-induced vomiting. Acupuncture is not offered as a cure for cancer, however there is some evidence to suggest that it may be useful in helping ease pain and other cancer-related symptoms. More high quality research is needed to understand its benefits.

Types of acupuncture

Modern forms of acupuncture techniques include:

- Sonopuncture, using sound waves via specialised tuning forks
- Chromopuncture, using coloured light instead of needles
- Laser acupuncture
- Electro acupuncture.

What do people who have tried acupuncture say?

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.

Four studies report what people with cancer, who have had acupuncture or acupressure, say about it. Participants had very positive perceptions of the benefits of acupuncture or said they experienced improvements in symptoms1, 2, 3, 4.

People reported feeling relaxed, decreases in their hot flushes, improved wellbeing and a sense of empowerment in controlling their nausea and vomiting1, 2.

What happens in a session?

- The therapist will take information about your medical history, medication, diet and sleep routine. Traditional acupuncturists may also ask to look at your tongue and take your pulse to help decide which meridians to work on and where to place the needles. In traditional acupuncture, very thin needles are inserted at acupoints. The needles are left in place for 15-30 minutes and may be gently twirled, heated or manipulated. You may be asked to remove some clothing.

- Acupuncture should cause virtually no pain if performed correctly and by a skilled therapist. However, a sensation known as ‘de qi’ may be felt. This can feel like heaviness, tightness or numbness. Therapists often view this sensation as an important part of the therapy.

- These sessions are tailored to individual symptoms and responses, and will aim to help with any ongoing problems such as hot flushes and nausea.

What do people who’ve tried acupuncture at Penny Brohn UK say?

‘Helped me sleep.’
‘I have had three sessions and found them very helpful.’
‘Acupuncture has helped with side-effects such as rash, heat, etc.’
‘Enhanced my wellbeing.’
‘Feel better after sessions. Great benefit.’
‘Very helpful as I have problems with energy flow and also helped ease pain in my lower back.’
‘The acupuncturist is great and it’s been great to build up a relationship with her as I feel safe in her care.’
What is the evidence on acupuncture?
Acupuncture for people with cancer is promoted for its benefits in the relief/improvement of many cancer related problems. Evidence to support the desired effect of acupuncture in helping people with cancer exists for chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, pain and hot flushes.

A high quality systematic review (Cochrane) looked at acupuncture’s effects on nausea and vomiting after chemotherapy. It found that acupuncture significantly reduced acute vomiting, but didn’t reduce nausea severity.5

A review compared a wider range of studies and most indicated favourable results of acupuncture on pain, and when the results were pooled, acupuncture proved equivalent to pain medication. However, when acupuncture was administered alongside conventional medicine, the results were significantly better than when people were given medication alone.6

Two studies looked at hot flushes in men with prostate cancer.8 They found that all studies reported beneficial effects. In both cases more research needs to be done to draw any conclusions.

Is it safe?
If practised by a trained professional therapist, who is a member of one of the main regulatory bodies for acupuncture, acupuncture is generally considered safe. Serious side-effects of acupuncture are rare. Reported side-effects include temporary dizziness, lightheadedness and fainting, and local bruising, bleeding, swelling and pain. People with low platelet counts should inform their acupuncturist before treatment. If you have, or are at risk of lymphoedema, needles should not be inserted into the affected area.

How much should it cost?
Most acupuncture patients pay for private treatment. The cost of acupuncture varies widely between practitioners. Initial sessions usually cost £40 to £70, and further sessions £25 to £60.

Are there any legal issues?
There is no regulation of acupuncture by law in the UK, what is termed statutory regulation, and in theory anyone could undertake a short course in acupuncture and start up a business. See below for a list of organisations that regulate the practice of acupuncture.

Organisations that represent acupuncture
British Acupuncture Council
www.acupuncture.org.uk

British Medical Acupuncture Society
www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture UK
www.atcm.co.uk
About healing

Healing has existed in all cultures and ages, in one form or another. It involves either a light touch or hands held close to the body. It is offered to promote wellness, generate balance and to encourage the body’s own self-healing. Many healers work with what they call the ‘spiritus vitae’ or life force, which is present in all of us.

Healing is generally non-denominational, respectful of all religions and does not expect the recipient to have faith or to be religious. Spiritual Healing, which originated in the 1950s, is available in many places across the country and is one of the most established forms of healing. Another popular form of healing is Reiki, a system of natural healing from Japan, devised around 100 years ago by Mikao Usui.

Each person is seen as unique, having their own spiritual connections to draw upon for support and loving energy. Practitioners recommend it for living a fuller, more connected life and to help towards acceptance and peace at the end of life. Many people report that healing brings about a state of balance and calm, with an increased awareness of their own spirituality.
What happens in a healing session?

Each healing session varies according to the individual practitioner and the approach in which they have been trained.

- Sessions can last from five minutes to an hour.
- The practitioner usually starts with some questions about health and wellbeing.
- Whilst healing generally follows a similar pattern, techniques can vary, so clients should discuss their needs with the practitioner.
- Treatment can be carried out sitting on a chair or lying on a couch.
- Clients keep their clothes on, but may take their shoes off.
- Having encouraged relaxation, the practitioner will work around the physical body and the energetic field. They may direct ‘healing energy’ to areas of the body where they feel there is a need, or where the client directs them. Healers say that this can bring about a balanced energetic state, in which the body’s own healing processes work best.
- During the session, the person receiving healing may experience light physical sensations, such as tingling, pressure, warmth or gentle pulsing. Sometimes people fall asleep or see images and colours.
- In the case of distant healing, ‘healing energy’, sometimes called ‘light and love’ is sent by intention to the person wherever they are.

To make the most of a healing session, healers advise some quiet time afterwards.

What do people say about healing?

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.

Many people with cancer who use healing say that it helps them feel better. This can be because a therapist spends time with them and comforts them. Having someone devote time to you, in a calm environment, can be very relaxing after the rush and stress of hospitals and treatment.

What do people rom Penny Brohn UK say about healing?

‘Supports everything I do in my life.’

What is the evidence on healing?

Scientific evidence does not support healing as a treatment for cancer. But many people say that it can increase peace of mind, reduce stress, relieve pain and anxiety, and may strengthen the will to live. Some studies support this. Qualitative research suggests that healing is generally a very positive experience.

Pain and anxiety

A recent good quality review looked at the effect of Reiki, a form of healing, on pain and anxiety. Seven studies were included, four of which studied cancer patients. There is some evidence from this small number of studies to suggest that Reiki may help with symptoms of pain and anxiety. A high quality systematic review looked at touch therapies (Healing Touch, Therapeutic Touch and Reiki) for pain relief, including cancer pain. The authors conclude that there is evidence for a ‘modest’ effect on pain relief.

Other trials, studies and reviews reported effects on psychological distress, fatigue and overall quality of life.
**Is it safe?**
There are no known adverse effects and healing is considered a safe and non-invasive complementary therapy for people with cancer, when used alongside usual treatments and practised by a trained healer¹.

Most healers will advise you not to do any hard physical exercise soon after your treatment. Tell your healer about your cancer treatment and if you are using any other type of complementary or alternative therapy².

**How much does it cost?**
Healing may be offered within the NHS or through a charity, for a donation or a small charge. Where offered privately, a charge can range from £25 to £55 per session¹.

**Are there any legal issues?**
There is no legal requirement for healers to hold a professional qualification. However, since recommendations in a government white paper issued in 2000, healing organisations have formed self-regulatory bodies. These have established and implemented high standards of practice through training, assessment, code of conduct and complaints procedures. Within the UK there are a number of accreditation bodies which offer formal training; for example, The Healing Trust offers a training course⁷.

**Organisations that represent healing**
Healers
www.ukhealers.info

Reiki
www.reikifed.co.uk

The Healing Trust
www.thehealingtrust.org.uk
01604 603247

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council
www.cnhc.org.uk
020 7653 1971

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**About massage**

Massage involves a therapist moving the soft tissues of the body. Traditionally it has been used to aid wellbeing, relaxation and general health.

People with cancer, who’ve had massage, have said they found it relaxing and it gave them a sense of relief. Research suggests that it may help to reduce pain, depression and anxiety.

Penny Brohn UK supports massage as a safe and beneficial therapy for those with cancer, when practised by a therapist with appropriate experience and/or training.

**Types of massage**

Massage is an ancient practice. There are references to its use as far back as 2700BC in China. Records suggest it was also used in Japanese, Arabic, Egyptian, Indian, Persian, Greek and Roman cultures. Modern massage involves the manipulation of muscles and soft tissues to aid health, wellbeing, circulation and relaxation. The level of touch used can be light and gentle or deep and quite strong. Massage in Europe has developed into many practices which draw on various traditions, most commonly on Swedish massage techniques. Massage doesn't include practices that involve manipulation of the skeletal system, such as osteopathy and chiropractics. Therapists often use a combination of techniques. Some common techniques include:

- Swedish or classical use five basic techniques: vibration, tapping, kneading, stroking and friction
- Holistic massage takes into account the whole person, mind, body and spirit
- Aromatherapy massage uses aromatherapy oils to add to the effect of the massage
- Sports massage helps athletes prevent or heal injuries
- Deep tissue massage reaches beyond the superficial layer of muscles to the muscles underneath.
What do people say about massage?

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.

People who have had massage describe many positive experiences. In one study people reported experiencing relief from suffering, a moment of ‘getting away’, a sense of strength, being special and empowerment. In another study when massage was given, whilst receiving chemotherapy, people described the welcome distraction from a frightening experience. They found it helped them turn negative thoughts to positive thoughts, and it was relaxing and ‘felt good’.

What is the evidence on massage?

Massage has traditionally been used as a therapy to aid relaxation but in the last few years many studies, trials and reviews have taken place looking into the other potential benefits of massage on people with cancer. The strongest evidence for benefits of massage is for stress and anxiety reduction, although research for pain control and management of other symptoms common to patients with cancer, including pain, is promising. Your oncologist should feel comfortable discussing massage therapy with you and be able to refer you to a qualified massage therapist.

A comprehensive cancer care facility in the United States explored the effects of a single session of massage on patients and their caregivers over a period of 29 months (September 2012 to January 2015). Massage therapy showed improvements in symptoms of pain, fatigue, anxiety, wellbeing and sleep. Further study is needed regarding the optimal massage dose and frequency.

Is it safe?

The National Cancer Institute urges massage therapists to take specific precautions with cancer patients and avoid massaging:

- Open wounds, bruises, or areas with skin breakdown
- Directly over the tumor site
- Areas with a blood clot in a vein
- Sensitive areas following radiation therapy.

It is considered safe to have gentle massage on areas that have not been affected by cancer. It should be practised by a therapist who is fully qualified and insured. Deep massage is not appropriate for areas affected by active cancer or people with low platelet counts. If you’re undergoing treatment for cancer, choose a massage therapist who is experienced at working with people with cancer.

How much does it cost?

Massage therapy can cost between £20 and £60 for an hour session. You may wish to speak to the therapist about their experience of working with cancer patients. Penny Brohn UK offers massage free of charge.
Are there any legal issues?
There is no legal regulation of massage therapists in the UK at present. Most therapists are well trained and are part of one of a number of professional associations. The General Council for Massage Therapy is promoting the self-regulation of massage therapists.

Organisations that represent massage
General Council for Massage Therapy
www.gcmt.org.uk
870 850 4452

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council
www.cnhc.org.uk
020 3668 0406

About reflexology
Modern Western reflexology is a therapy where pressure is applied to specific areas of the feet and sometimes the hands and 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.

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.

What happens in a 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’ll 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 need to 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. Pressure in some areas may feel sensitive or uncomfortable, but should not be painful.
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 the other 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.

Is it 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.

Reflexology is not recommended if you have recent or persistent foot conditions or injuries, open 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.

How much does it cost?
Sessions can cost between £25 to £50 per hour. Some hospitals and cancer care centres offer reflexology free of charge or at a reduced cost.

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.

Organisations that represent reflexology
The Association of Reflexologists
www.or.org.uk
01823 351010

The British Reflexology Association
www.britreflex.co.uk
01886 821207

What do people say about reflexology?
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 reported positive experiences of reflexology, including relaxation and reduced tension and anxiety. In one study people reported an improvement in physical symptoms, but the other 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.

What do people who have tried reflexology at Penny Brohn UK say?
‘Wonderful relaxation and stress relief.’

‘Very relaxing. (Reflexology) helps to keep me focused. It also helped to have something to look forward to.’
About shiatsu

Shiatsu is a Japanese bodywork therapy that uses the principles of acupressure. This is where the practitioner applies pressure to points around the body to release blocks in the flow of energy (Qi), through meridians (energy pathways) of the body.

Shiatsu is offered to people with cancer to enhance wellbeing and mood, and to reduce stress, anxiety, pain, nausea and vomiting.

What happens in a shiatsu session?

• A shiatsu session is usually an hour in length.
• For the first visit, the shiatsu therapist will ask questions about medical history, health, diet and lifestyle.
• Treatment is generally carried out on a futon-style mattress, which is low down on the floor. If clients cannot lie down, then shiatsu can be practised sitting up or on a treatment couch.
• Clients keep their clothes on throughout the session and are advised to wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes.
• During the session therapists may apply pressure to the body using their thumbs, palms, fingers, knees, elbows and feet.
• At the end of a session, clients are advised to drink water and relax for a while, before returning to normal activities.

What do people say about shiatsu?

People who have had shiatsu report enhanced wellbeing and better symptom control. One study looked at shiatsu offered through a palliative day care centre. Some of the participants were people with cancer. Overall people were very positive and reported increases in energy levels, better relaxation, increased feeling of confidence, better symptom control, better mobility, improved clarity of thought and a restoration of wellbeing.

What do people who’ve tried shiatsu at Penny Brohn UK say?

‘Very helpful. (Shiatsu) helped with stiff joints. I felt more mobile than I thought I was.’

‘I had recently undergone surgery and the session helped re-energise my body and emotions.’

‘I completed one session and the effects after were enormous. I felt so relaxed and better after.’

What is the evidence on shiatsu?

In comparison to other complementary therapies, there is very little research on shiatsu. This does not mean that shiatsu does not help people with cancer, rather that there has been no good quality research which has tried to test the claims of shiatsu providers.

Some research has looked at the effects of shiatsu overall, not just for people with cancer. A systematic review found that shiatsu studies are of insufficient quality and quantity to draw conclusions. There was better evidence for acupressure, which uses the same pressure points on the body as shiatsu. Acupressure may be beneficial for pain, nausea and vomiting and sleep. The authors suggest that evidence for acupressure may also support the use of shiatsu; more high quality research needs to be done on shiatsu itself to determine its effectiveness.
Is it safe?
If practised by a suitably trained therapist, who is experienced in working with people with cancer, shiatsu is considered safe. For those with low platelet count, osteoporosis, fever or those in the first three months of pregnancy, the practitioner will use a more gentle form of shiatsu.

How much does it cost
Shiatsu therapy can cost between £30 and £60 per hour. Some UK hospitals and cancer care centres, including Penny Brohn UK, offer shiatsu free of charge.

Are there any legal issues?
Although shiatsu practitioners undergo training, they are not legally required to hold any formal qualification. Voluntary registration is coordinated by the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council.

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer
- Cancer Research UK
  0808 800 4040
  www.cancerresearchuk.org
- Macmillan Cancer Support
  0808 808 0000
  www.macmillan.org.uk
- NHS 111
  111
  www.nhs.uk

More information on complementary therapies
- NHS Evidence
  www.evidence.nhs.uk
- CAM Cancer
  www.cam-cancer.org
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 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.

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