



Complementary Therapies

Complementary therapies are those that fall for the most part, outside the mainstream of conventional medicine. They may be used by people against the symptoms of HIV or to lessen the side effects of drugs. Some people combine complementary and orthodox treatments in an integrated approach, others choose to use complementary therapies only.

Do Complementary therapies work?

Often the worth of these treatments has not been proven in a scientific way. They tend to substitute this scientific proof with a belief or philosophy, and anecdotal evidence is produced to support the claims made by therapists. Not all complementary therapies work for everybody and not all therapies are safe. There is no such thing as a treatment without potential harm and complementary therapies can be dangerous when used incompetently. The use of some complementary therapies can induce harmful side effects and complications, or can prevent a clear diagnosis of the effects of orthodox treatment. Some substances can be very potent, so you should be alert to any changes to your body and discuss them with your doctor and therapist. If you are taking anti-retrovirals, You need to check that use of complementary therapies, including dietary supplements, does not interfere with the effectiveness of your anti-HIV medication.

Your Doctor, Your Therapist and You

Whenever you consider any change in therapy, complementary or conventional, you should consult your doctor. In this way you will be monitored not only to ensure that the therapy is doing no harm, but also to see how the therapy is working for you. Many complementary therapists have an incomplete knowledge of HIV so it is still important to see your doctor who will know what signs to look out for if you start to become ill. Be very wary of complementary therapists who warn you that conventional medicines should be avoided. Your doctor should be aware of the complementary therapies you are using and should be able to discuss these with you in a fair and balanced way. Your doctor and your therapist are there to provide you with the best care and services. In maintaining a collaborative relationship with them, you will be able to get the best of both worlds. A good complementary therapist will know and understand the treatments you may already be on, and will offer therapies to help counteract the side effects, or increase the beneficial effects of orthodox treatments.

What follows is a brief overview of the main complementary therapies.

Acupressure is the application of pressure to points around the body in order to balance the different energies which are thought to be required for good health.

Acupuncture is a technique mostly used in Chinese Medicine over the past 2,000 years, whereby needles are placed into points where energy is thought to flow through the body. The needles are meant to stimulate and unblock the energy flowing through these points. Make sure the acupuncturist uses new needles every time. There have been some reports of acupuncture relieving pain associated with peripheral neuropathy and helping with nausea or diarrhoea.

Aromatherapy is treatment by the essential oils of aromatic plants and spices. Each oil is meant to have a different healing and/or stimulatory effect on the mind and body. The oils can be used directly on the skin in a base oil, with massage, by inhalation, or in baths. A competent aromatherapist *must* be used as the oils can be very potent and can be associated with serious side effects.

Autogenics is a therapy where you are taught six basic forms of relaxation to reach a deep state of meditation or near hypnosis. People who conduct this therapy believe that it is possible to 'talk' your body into a state of well-being.

Ayurvedics is the traditional medicine and philosophy practised in India. It incorporates diet, exercise, lifestyle and the manipulation of energy points. Clinical trials using ayurvedic formulations for treating HIV are currently being conducted in India.

Bach Flower remedies were developed in the '30s for treating emotional well-being. There are 38 flower remedies available. Bach flower remedies are considered harmless and are readily available from health food shops and some pharmacies.

Chiropractics involves an assessment of your body alignment determined by the position and condition of your spine. Spine and joints are then manipulated to correct any imbalances or misalignment.

Crystal Therapy uses different crystals to harness healing energies into different parts of the body. For instance, therapists believe rose quartz has the power to enhance immune function.

Diet or clinical nutrition, is perhaps one of the more obvious forms of complementary therapy but is often overlooked by people who think their diet is adequate. HIV and related conditions make attention to good dietary intake essential in the ongoing management of your condition. Your clinic will have an expert dietitian to advise you on this. If you are seeking advice from any non-NHS dietary 'expert' you should carefully check their qualifications. Bad dietary advice can be extremely harmful and have serious consequences.

Exercise: nearly any form of movement that increases the heart rate or muscle tone will generally improve your sense of wellbeing and reduce stress. Forms of exercise that can be considered are walking, running, tennis, aerobics, weight training or t'ai chi and yoga. It is important to start at a pace that is compatible to your general state of health and fitness, slowly introducing your body to exercise so as not to cause damage or pain.

Healing (Reiki) is the transfer of energy from practitioner to patient. Practitioners believe that through them the patient can access universal energy. This is usually perceived as a feeling of warmth where hands are applied bringing a sense of calm and restoring balance to the body.

Herbalism: Many modern day western medicines are based on extracts from plant and herbs, but herbalists believe that it is the whole plant or herb itself that is required for all round treatment to achieve best results and prevent side-effects. Some herbal medicines e.g. St. Johns Wort are not recommended with certain antiretrovirals. Inform your doctor or pharmacist of any herbal medicines you are taking so they can ensure that they are safe to take with antiretrovirals.

Homeopathy uses substances from plant, animal or mineral sources that would normally cause a person to show certain symptoms of a disease. Therapists believe that by diluting down these substances thousands of times they become potent against the disease that causes the same symptoms as the remedy. The concept of this therapy is that 'like cures like' helping the body to rid itself of the symptoms of the disease.

Hypnotherapy helps you enter a deep state of relaxation where the therapist tries to contact the unconscious mind to suggest changes in various mental states (e.g. insomnia or stress). Only qualified hypnotherapists should be consulted, preferably a psychiatrist, psychologist or a doctor who has completed a recognised hypnotherapy course.

Kinesiology was derived by chiropractors in the USA and uses a mixture of pressure points and muscle strength tests to gauge a person's general health and balances of energy. Acupressure is then used to correct any perceived imbalances of energy or health

Massage is a widely recognised form of therapy for relaxing, strengthening and stimulating muscles.

Meditation: there are many different types of meditation. Some simply teach one how to relax or reduce stress and improve feelings of well being and confidence. There are many books and tapes available for self-tuition.

Naturopathy looks at an entire range of diagnostic techniques when assessing a client. The naturopath may look at a person's general health, lifestyle, diet and any symptoms of illness that may be present. The aim of naturopathy is to assist the natural ability of the body to eliminate the cause of ill health.

Osteopathy is gentler form of chiropractic therapy involving not only the manipulation of the spine, but also the massaging of muscles.

Reflexology uses the stimulation of pressure points in the hands and feet. Reflexologists believe that 'energy meridians' can be stimulated to enhance the body's healing properties.

Shiatsu is a form of Japanese massage aimed at stimulating acupressure points. The philosophy is similar to acupuncture except that pressure is used instead of needles to stimulate various energy points in the body.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a mixture of the benefits of acupuncture and Chinese herbs. It is said to be able to counteract certain symptoms of HIV and uses herbal mixtures said to have anti-HIV properties.

Visualisation is a technique to 'program' positive thoughts or images to promote good health and healing of the body.