

Complementary therapies

This sheet has been written to provide general information about complementary therapies for people with arthritis. It provides a summary of the current evidence about complementary therapies for arthritis as well as tips for the safe use of these therapies.

What are complementary therapies?

'Complementary therapies' are any treatments or therapies that are not part of the conventional treatment (such as medicines or surgery) of a disease. Complementary therapies are taken alongside conventional treatments and are also known as 'traditional' or 'alternative' therapies. Examples of complementary therapies include acupuncture, massage, aromatherapy, vitamins, minerals and herbal medicines.

Do complementary therapies work?

The main criticism of complementary therapies is that there is often little scientific proof that they work. In many cases, little or no research has been done. In other cases, only poor quality studies have been done so the results may be inaccurate or exaggerated. This does not mean that you should not try complementary therapies. You should just make sure you understand if the benefits have been clearly proven so that you are not misled or given false hope. Current reliable evidence about complementary therapies for arthritis is summarised below.

Are complementary therapies safe?

As many of these therapies have not been thoroughly tested, it is not known if they are safe or unsafe. It is known that complementary medicines need to be treated with the same care and respect as other medicines. Many complementary medicines can cause side effects and some interact and interfere with other medicines. This can cause serious health problems or make other medicines (for example, prescription medicines) less effective. Before using any complementary therapy, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or a qualified complementary therapy practitioner.

Before you start using a complementary therapy

Here are a few steps to protect yourself:

- Get an accurate diagnosis from your doctor. It is important to know exactly what type of arthritis you have before you start any treatment.

	Osteoarthritis (OA)	Rheumatoid arthritis	Back pain
SOME EVIDENCE OF BENEFIT	Acupuncture for knee OA	Gamma linolenic acid	Devils claw*
	Glucosamine sulfate		Cayenne*
	Avocado-soybean unsaponifiables (ASU)		Willow bark*
	Capsaicin		Acupuncture for long-term back pain
	Green lipped mussel		(*Only tested for 6 weeks, long-term effects unknown)
	Ginger extract		
UNCLEAR EVIDENCE OF BENEFIT**	Acupuncture for hip OA	Green lipped mussel	Acupuncture for short-term back pain
	Chondroitin	Acupuncture	
	Tipi tree		
	Green tea		
EVIDENCE OF NO BENEFIT	Selenium	Selenium	
	Vitamin A, C, E	Vitamin A, C, E	

** This does not mean these treatments will not help you; it means further research is necessary

- Talk to your doctor about the treatment. Find out if the treatment is likely to interact with your current treatments. Do not stop any current treatments without first discussing it with your doctor.
- Get information about the treatment. Keep in mind that the information given to you by the person promoting the product or therapy may not be reliable. Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or local Arthritis Office.
- Make sure the treatment or therapy is something you can afford, particularly if you need to keep using it.
- Check qualifications of practitioners involved. The websites of some professional associations are listed below for more information or to help you find an accredited practitioner.
- Proof for the treatment relies only on testimonials (personal stories). This may be a sign that the treatment has not been scientifically tested.
- You are told to give up your current effective treatments or discouraged from getting treatment from your doctor.
- The treatment is expensive and not covered by any health fund.

Working with your healthcare team

You may feel concerned that your doctor or other members of your healthcare team will disapprove of complementary therapies. However it is very important to keep your healthcare team informed, even if they do not approve. Your healthcare team, particularly your doctor and pharmacist, can't give you the best professional advice without knowing all the treatments you are using. This includes vitamin supplements, herbal medicines and other therapies.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Warning signs

Be on the look out for the following warning signs when considering a new treatment:

- A cure is offered. There is currently no cure for most forms of arthritis so be wary of products or treatments that promise a cure.
- The cure, treatment or therapy is described as secret. Legitimate practitioners share their knowledge so that their peers can review their findings.

All treatments, even 'natural' ones, can have side effects.

Always inform your healthcare team of any treatments you are taking.