Complementary Therapies
Contents

About this booklet 3

What are complementary therapies? 4

Tips for finding a complementary therapist 6

Touch, pressure and movement therapies 7

Acupressure 7
Acupuncture 8
Alexander technique 9
Aromatherapy 10
Chiropractic 11
Hydrotherapy 12
Massage 13
Osteopathy 14
Reflexology 15
Tai Chi 16
Yoga 17
Other therapies 18

Medicine- and diet-related therapies 19

Herbalism 19
Homeopathy 20
Other therapies 21

Mind and emotion therapies 23

Counselling and psychotherapy 23
Meditation 24
Other therapies 25

Other useful organisations 26

How Arthritis Care can help you 30
SOME PEOPLE WITH ARTHRITIS are turning to complementary therapies to relieve their pain and to try to improve their mobility, confidence and overall wellbeing.

This booklet offers a brief introduction to some of the more popular complementary therapies that are available, and provides contact details to help you find a reliable, qualified practitioner.

What do you think of this booklet?
Email us on reviewing@arthritiscare.org.uk with your thoughts – we would really like to hear from you.

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Complementary therapies work alongside (i.e. complement) conventional medicines. There are many different forms of complementary therapy, such as homeopathy, acupuncture, herbalism, osteopathy, chiropractic or reflexology.

Many people find they help to relieve pain and ease stiffness when used in addition to the conventional drugs prescribed by their doctor. They can also improve your general sense of wellbeing and help you to relax.

Complementary therapies often involve making certain lifestyle changes, such as alteration in diet or exercise. Many people find that these therapies work for them, while others remain sceptical about the medical benefits. It is a good idea to discuss new therapies with your doctor before trying them, as some may interfere with medication.
The wide choice of complementary therapies on offer can be bewildering. The following pages offer a short introduction to those that are popular among people with arthritis – as well as touching on some of the less well-known treatments.

We have organised the different therapies into three groups:

- Touch, pressure and movement therapies
- Medicine and diet-related therapies
- Mind and emotion therapies.
Tips for finding a complementary therapist

• Ask your GP if they can refer you on the NHS.

• It is always good to be guided by a personal recommendation if possible; ask people you know and trust if they can suggest a practitioner. If not, look online for an appropriate professional register, which should be able to give you a list of practitioners in your area.

• When you first make contact, check out details such as how long they have been practising, how much the treatment will cost, how long each session might take, and what you should expect.

• A good practitioner will always make you feel at ease, readily answer any questions you might have, and explain what treatment they intend to offer you. If you feel at all uncomfortable, say so, or look for an alternative.

• Make sure your complementary therapist has insurance before starting treatment.

• If a practitioner suggests you stop taking prescribed drugs, be very wary and speak to your doctor before taking any action. Never stop taking prescribed drugs without discussing it first with your doctor. Stopping some courses of medication too early can be dangerous.

• Complications are very rare, but if you are pursuing any form of complementary therapy at the same time as receiving medical treatment or taking a course of drugs, it is wise to mention it to your doctor.
Acupressure has been described as acupuncture without the needles. Its roots are in traditional Chinese medicine and it works on the same principle of stimulating points in the body. Many acupuncturists will also use acupressure as part of their treatment – using their fingers, thumbs and even feet and knees to stimulate specific pressure points. It can also be suitable for self-treatment at home for minor ailments such as headaches.

By stimulating pressure points, acupressure encourages circulation and releases tension.
Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a treatment with its origins in ancient Chinese medicine. It involves inserting very fine needles into parts of the body to stimulate nerves under the skin and in the muscles. This stimulation encourages the release of the body’s natural pain-relieving substances – endorphins. Acupuncture can be very effective in helping to alleviate pain in a range of conditions, including many forms of arthritis. Although it is sometimes available on the NHS, you are more likely to need to pay for private treatment. Speak to your doctor in the first instance, who will be able to refer you or put you in touch with a qualified professional.

Acupuncture is safe when done by a properly qualified practitioner. Generally, between three and six treatment sessions are required, although long-standing conditions may need more regular treatment.

arthritiscare.org.uk
free helpline: 0808 800 4050
Alexander technique

The Alexander technique concentrates on how we use our bodies in everyday life, and teaches new ways of using the body to improve balance, co-ordination and awareness. By learning to stand and move correctly, people can ease stresses on their body and alleviate conditions that are made worse by poor posture. Regular practice may successfully change a lifetime of bad habits.

The importance of good posture

If you have arthritis, you will find that developing and maintaining good posture can really help to put less strain on your body.

People with poor posture tend to slouch, causing the weight of the body to fall forward, which puts strain on muscles and joints. Poor posture can develop for a number of reasons, but it can be due to muscles and tendons being either too tight or too weak and not supporting the body as they should.

Good posture looks better and aligns the body. It can be hard work to maintain good posture, but improvements can be achieved in a short space of time. Exercise is key, and different exercises can help in different ways, including to strengthen, lengthen and even shorten muscles.

For more, see our Exercise and Arthritis booklet. Go to arthritiscare.org.uk or call our helpline to receive a copy.
Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils from plants to promote health and wellbeing. Essential oils can be used in many ways, including as a vapour that is inhaled, in baths or in a burner. But one of the most common methods is as part of an aromatherapy massage. This combines the benefits of touch with the therapeutic properties of essential oils. The oils can help users both through their powerful aromas and by being directly absorbed through the skin. Each oil has its own particular properties – some are invigorating, some relaxing and some act as anti-inflammatories.

Pure essential oils can be used at home but should not be applied directly to your skin. They are available at health food shops, chemists and by mail order. Rosemary, camomile, marjoram and juniper oils are all thought to be good for muscular or joint aches and pains. However, they may be harmful when used in large quantities, especially if you are pregnant.
**Chiropractic**

Chiropractic improves mobility and relieves pain by focusing on mechanical problems in the joints – especially the spine. Chiropractors use their hands to adjust the joints in the spine and other parts of the body where movement is restricted. While it cannot reverse damage in joints affected by arthritis, this regular adjustment may keep joints healthier and more mobile, while also reducing pain and slowing down further damage.

On your first visit to a chiropractor, it is likely that X-rays of your spine will be taken.

Treatment should not be given where there is inflammation (for instance, during a flare-up of rheumatoid arthritis), infection, or if osteoporosis is suspected.
Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy allows people with arthritis to exercise the joints and muscles while being supported by warm water. The warm temperature of the water aids muscle relaxation and eases pain in the joints, making it easier to relax. Because the water supports your weight, the range of movement in your joints should also increase. You can improve muscle strength by pushing your arms and legs against the water.

Most hydrotherapy pools range in depth and have steps to get into the pool, but there is normally a hoist too.
Massage

We use massage instinctively to ‘rub something better’ or soothe and calm someone in distress. As a therapy it can loosen stiff muscles by using gentle soothing and kneading movements, and improve the tone of slack muscles using firmer, faster movements. Massage can also increase the flow of blood and lymph through the body and ease tension. On a psychological level, a good massage leaves you feeling relaxed and cared for.

Your partner or a close friend could help out, or you can go to a professional masseur. Self-massage is also possible (gently kneading the muscles in a painful area to increase blood flow and bring warmth). Be careful to massage around an inflamed joint, not directly on the joint itself, and always stop if pain develops.

Therapeutic massage generally takes place on a special table, and a full body massage may require you to undress down to underwear, then wear a towel.
Osteopathy

Like chiropractic, osteopathy focuses on the importance of the spine and joints. It is based on the principle that individual wellbeing depends on your bones, muscles, ligaments and connective tissues all working smoothly together. Osteopaths believe that for your body to work well, its structure must also work well. Osteopaths use ‘adjustments’ of the joints (similar to those described for chiropractors) and more relaxing manipulation for softer areas to correct structural and mechanical faults, which allows the body to heal itself. They may also give advice on lifestyle changes and suggest exercises to do at home.

Osteopathy is most commonly used for back and joint pain, and not just for arthritis. Sciatica, frozen shoulders and sports injuries can also benefit.

Many doctors will refer patients for osteopathy (sometimes on the NHS). Treatment should not be given if osteoporosis is suspected, or in area of infection or inflammation (during a flare-up of rheumatoid arthritis, for instance).
Reflexology

Reflexology works on the principle that stimulating specific areas of the body can help remove energy blocks, relieve stress and encourage the body to heal itself.

Pressure is applied to certain areas, or ‘zones’, of the body (typically on the hands or feet). These zones are believed to map other areas or organs of the body, and the pressure is believed to effect a physical change in those areas. Practitioners apply a pressing movement using their fingers or thumbs.

Reflexology is generally a very pleasant experience, although it can sometimes be painful on a sensitive reflex point and should be avoided where inflammation is present.

Reflexology does not claim to offer a cure for any condition or ailment, but it can be a very relaxing therapeutic treatment.
Tai chi

Tai chi originated as an ancient Chinese non-combative martial art. It claims to improve the flow of chi (energy), calm the mind and promote self-healing using sequences of slow, graceful movements. Ideally, it should be performed outdoors, and practised daily to achieve maximum benefit.

It is best to learn in classes where the teacher can observe, guide and correct your posture, although DVDs are great for learning the basic techniques.

Over time, practising tai chi can help improve balance and general mobility, as well as muscle strength.
Yoga

Yoga is great for:

- flexibility
- posture
- muscle tone
- mobility
- relaxation.

Asanas (positions) move the body in many different directions and this, together with special yoga breathing, stimulates muscles and joints, circulation, digestion and the nervous and endocrine systems.

Anyone can try yoga, and a good place to start is to find a local class that will guide you through the basics. Most gyms, community centres and leisure centres offer yoga classes. There are also many books and DVDs available.

Yoga can help the stiffness associated with arthritis. However, you should consult your doctor or physiotherapist before starting a class, as not all yoga positions are suitable for those with replacement joints or a limited range of movement.
Other therapies:

**Qigong**

Pronounced ‘chi gong’, this is a system of easy-to-learn movements, breathing and meditation designed to improve the circulation of chi (life energy) around the body.

**Reiki healing**

This involves a therapist placing their hands in 12 different positions over the body to treat all of the major organs and glands, and to restore the balance of chi.

**Shiatsu massage**

Shiatsu means ‘finger pressure’ in Japanese. This therapy involves using fingers to apply stretching and squeezing movements to break up blockages in the energy flow.
Herbalism

Herbalism is based on ancient traditions of exploiting the natural healing properties of herbs. Like the synthetic drugs used in orthodox medicine, herbs have anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties. Practitioners believe that herbs can activate, regulate and heal any organ in the body, by stimulating its natural healing processes.

Herbal medicines are drawn from plants and plant extracts, and some have become very popular. For example, St John’s Wort appears to act as an antidepressant by raising serotonin levels, and Devil’s Claw is believed to have natural anti-inflammatory properties.

While herbal medicines are generally safe to take, there are exceptions, and some can reduce the effectiveness of certain prescribed drugs, so always check with your doctor before taking. Some may be harmful when used in large quantities, especially if you are pregnant.
Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on the principle that ‘like cures like’, and claims to provoke the body into healing itself. The aim of conventional medicine is to suppress symptoms – for example, by using anti-inflammatories to reduce inflammation. Homeopathy, on the other hand, takes an agent that mimics the symptoms of the illness, and dilutes it down to the point where little or no trace of the substance can be found in the medicine. Homeopaths believe these diluted substances have the power to treat symptoms.

The evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy in current medical literature is minimal and contradictory. But side effects are unusual, and remedies are not normally harmful when taken alongside conventional medicines.

Medical homeopaths are doctors or other health professionals who have additional qualifications in homeopathy. Non-medical homeopaths are professionals who only practise homeopathy. Using a medical homeopath offers you the reassurance that your practitioner has conventional medical skills, although the homeopathic treatment itself may not be any different.
Other therapies:

Nutritional therapy

This uses diet and dietary supplements, such as high-dose vitamins, as a basis for treatment. Nutritional therapists may also recommend detox treatments or food avoidance. They believe that most chronic illnesses, including arthritis, can be helped or slowed down with the right nutritional methods.

What is the difference between a dietitian, nutritionist and nutritional therapist?

These three titles may be easily confused, but there are important differences between them.

- Dietitians are qualified health professionals able to assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional issues. They work both within the NHS and in private practice and are regulated by law.
- Nutritionists are qualified to provide information about food and healthy eating, and to advise on ways of giving the body the nutrition it needs. They are not currently regulated in the UK.
- Nutritional therapists are also unregulated. There is no recognised qualification to become a nutritional therapist, and the supplements and testing methods they use are not approved by the NHS.
Ayurveda

This treatment aims to restore health through purifying techniques using herbal remedies, as well as diet, yoga postures, meditation, breathing exercises and massage.

Naturopathy

This relies on the body’s own ability to heal itself – with a little help. It uses dietary and lifestyle changes, alongside other techniques including herbs, hydrotherapy, yoga, massage and osteopathy.
Counselling and psychotherapy

It is quite common for anyone coping with long-term, pain to experience feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, or even anger. Sometimes people are afraid of counselling, fearing that others might think they ‘should’ be coping, or coping better than they are, by themselves. But counselling is a proven and effective type of therapy that provides an opportunity for you to talk about your feelings and fears in a confidential and supportive setting.

Counselling should always be an equal partnership between you and your therapist. Counsellors encourage you to make your own decisions, and support you in putting these into practice.

If you find you are experiencing symptoms of depression (such as poor sleep, changes in appetite, crying, or gloomy thoughts) let someone know. Ask your doctor about counselling or therapy.

> If you would like to see a counsellor or therapist, look for one who is registered with an appropriate body such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (bacp.co.uk) or the UK Council for Psychotherapy (ukcp.org.uk). Both offer a ‘find a therapist’ option on their websites. See page 29 for contact details.
Meditation

Meditation is relaxation for the mind. It allows us the time and space to achieve a greater awareness of ourselves, and of our relationship with the environment. It can be particularly effective in helping those needing to manage stress or a stress-related illness.

An increasingly popular form of meditative practice is mindfulness – a technique of paying attention to (being mindful of) the present moment to achieve a sense of calm and a better understanding of yourself. Mindfulness aims to heighten our awareness of our everyday lives – our thoughts, feelings, experiences and surroundings – enabling us to effect positive change.

Classes offer a good introduction to meditation or mindfulness techniques, but there are also books, CDs or DVDs available that can guide individual study.
Other therapies:

**Autogenic training**

Autogenic means ‘generated from within’, and this therapy aims to teach you to relax and decrease stress through a series of basic mental and physical exercises.

**Hypnotherapy**

Hypnotherapy (carried out by a hypnotherapist) can be used alongside conventional therapy for a range of long-term health conditions. Evidence is limited, but it can help to control pain, relieve stress and combat addictions.

**Music therapy**

Music can stimulate the release of chemicals in the brain (endorphins) – helping alleviate depression, creating a sense of wellbeing, and protecting the body against pain.

**Spiritual healing**

Spiritual healers aim to treat your spirit, as well as your body and mind, by channelling healing energies. They also aim to re-energise and relax you, enabling you to draw on your natural resources to deal with illness or injury.
Other useful organisations

**General**

**Arthritis Research UK**
Funds medical research into arthritis and produces information.
Tel: 0300 790 0400
arthritisresearchuk.org

**NHS**
NHS Choices: for links to NHS services in your area,
NHS 111 Service: Tel: 111
nhs.uk
NHS Inform (Scotland): Tel: 111
nhsinform.co.uk
NHS Direct (Wales): Tel: 0845 4647
nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

**Complementary therapies**

**Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine**
Umbrella body providing information on a range of complementary and natural medicines. Can help you find qualified practitioners locally.
Tel: 0207 922 7980
icnm.org.uk

**British Complementary Medicine Association**
Tel: 0845 345 5977
bcma.co.uk
Touch, pressure and movement therapies

The British Medical Acupuncture Society
Provides patient information and links to practitioners.
Tel: 01606 786782
thebmas.com

The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique
Search on the website for individual teachers or details of courses and workshops.
Tel: 020 8885 6524
alexandertechnique.co.uk

General Chiropractic Council
Find a registered chiropractor in your area.
Tel: 020 7713 5155
gcc-uk.org

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
For a list of chartered physiotherapists registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Search online for a particular speciality, such as arthritis, rheumatology, acupuncture, hydrotherapy, or home visits.
Tel: 020 7306 6666
csp.org.uk

GCMT (The Council for Soft Tissue Therapies)
The governing body for massage and soft tissue therapies. Provides links to a variety of different council members.
Tel: 0870 850 4452
gcmt.org.uk
The General Osteopathic Council
Regulatory body promoting patient safety and upholding standards.
A useful leaflet: ‘What to expect from your osteopath’ can be downloaded from the website.
Tel: 020 7357 6655
osteopathy.org.uk

Tai Chi Union for Great Britain
Information on Tai Chi, plus links to local instructors, and a range of books, CDs and DVDs available to buy online.
taichiunion.com

The British Wheel of Yoga
Website offers wide-ranging information about yoga, postures, classes, and search facility to find a local teacher or class.
Tel: 01529 306851
bwy.org.uk

Medicine- and diet-related therapies

The National Institute of Medical Herbalists
Promotes the benefits and safe use of herbal medicine practice.
Website includes a ‘find a herbalist’ search facility.
Tel: 01392 426022
nimh.org.uk

The Society of Homeopaths (non-medical homeopaths)
Offers a search facility to find members who practise in accordance with the Society’s Code of Ethics and Practice.
Tel: 01604 817890
homeopathy-soh.org
British Homeopathic Association  
(medical homeopaths)
Champions the integration of homeopathy into the healthcare system and availability for all. Website includes a ‘find a practitioner’ option.  
Tel: 0203 640 5903  
britishhomeopathic.org

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
The main body in the UK representing counselling and psychotherapy.
Tel: 01455 883300  
bacp.co.uk  
The BACP offers a searchable directory of private therapists in the UK, and useful information about therapy and answers to common questions, at:  
itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
Tel: 020 7014 9955  
Website includes a ‘find a therapist’ search option.  
ukcp.org.uk

Mind and emotion therapies
How Arthritis Care can help you

Want to talk to someone about your arthritis?  
Or read more about the condition?

Call our free, confidential helpline on 0808 800 4050 for information and support. We’re open weekdays from 09:30 to 17:00 – we’d really like to hear from you.

We have over 40 free booklets and factsheets on various aspects of arthritis, from diet and surgery, to managing pain and fatigue. These can be sent to you in the post – just ask our helpline staff for details.

Go online

You can download all our booklets and factsheets as a PDF at arthritiscare.org.uk/information

We also have an online community, where you can chat to others with arthritis, and can be reached at arthritiscareforum.org.uk

Talk to others

There are Arthritis Care branches and groups all over the country, where you can chat to other people with arthritis, in a social setting. Call the helpline or visit arthritiscare.org.uk to find your nearest branch or group.
Share your experience

Want to share your story to help others live well with arthritis? Contact our helpline if you would like to get your story heard.

Raise awareness

Could you help us raise awareness of arthritis? Whether it’s putting up posters in your local supermarket, handing out leaflets or organising a bake sale, we would really appreciate your time.

Donate

Help us to help the 10 million people in the UK living with arthritis. Every donation, big or small, makes life better for those with the condition.

Just visit arthritiscare.org.uk/donate or call us on 020 7380 6540

Gifts in Wills

Gifts in Wills help us reach over half the people we support.

For more information about remembering Arthritis Care in your will, visit arthritiscare.org.uk/wills or call 0330 2002 0311

Become a member of Arthritis Care and receive Inspire, our quarterly magazine on how to live well with arthritis.
We believe there is always something you can do to reduce the impact of arthritis. Call our free and confidential helpline. Talking about arthritis, sharing your concerns and how you feel, can really help.

There are free publications that you can find on our website or order by post. Or you may prefer to visit our online community where you can chat to others about the things that matter to you.

To find out more about arthritis and Arthritis Care call:

0808 800 4050
(Open weekdays 09:30–17:00)

arthritiscare.org.uk

Twitter: @arthritis_care
Facebook: facebook.com/arthritiscareuk
Instagram: @arthritiscareuk

Arthritis Care, Floor 4, Linen Court, London N1 6AD
Registered Charity Nos. 206563 and SC038693

Last reviewed in 2016; next review in 2019
Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.

Arthritis Care is a certified member of The Information Standard. This means that you can be confident that Arthritis Care is a reliable and trustworthy source of health and social care information.