

Complementary therapy

Complementary therapy is used alongside mainstream treatment. It can't cure or treat lymphoma. However, some people find it can improve aspects of physical and emotional wellbeing.

There are many different types of complementary therapy. In this information, we cover some of the popular types and tell you where you can find further information.

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What is complementary therapy?

Complementary therapy is treatment that's used together **with** mainstream treatment for lymphoma – for example, **chemotherapy**, **radiotherapy** or **targeted treatments**. In this information, we cover **some of the popular types of complementary therapy**.

What is alternative therapy?

Complementary therapy is different to 'alternative medicine' or 'alternative therapy'. Alternative therapies are used **instead** of mainstream therapy. Alternative approaches are often based on traditional cultural theories and beliefs about health and wellbeing. Examples include dietary supplements, herbal medicines and homeopathy.

There are no alternative therapies registered in the UK to treat lymphoma. They are not recommended by the NHS and there is no evidence that they are effective anti-cancer treatments. Some alternative therapies can affect how well other drugs (for example, chemotherapy) work. It is therefore important that you check with your medical team before trying an alternative therapy, even if you've used it in the past.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)

Sometimes, complementary and alternative medicines are grouped together as 'complementary and alternative medicine' (CAM). CAM is any product, process or supplement that is not considered mainstream treatment.

Complementary therapy and lymphoma

Research suggests that around 45 out of 100 of people with cancer have used a complementary or alternative therapy since their diagnosis.

Complementary therapies might help to control symptoms and **side effects of treatment** for lymphoma, such as pain, feeling or being sick (**nausea**) and **fatigue**. Many people also use a complementary therapy to improve their overall psychological wellbeing. For example, to **manage stress, mood** and anxiety.

While complementary therapies can be helpful, be wary of any claims that they can treat or cure your lymphoma.

Your medical team might be able to suggest a complementary therapy based on your preferences and what you hope to get from it.

Cancer Research UK has information about the **different types of complementary therapies and their safety in people with cancer**.

There are many different types of complementary therapy, which can bring different benefits for different people. While no complementary therapy can treat cancer, if you're interested in trying one, it's worth talking to your clinical nurse specialist about options and for guidance.

Barbara Von Barsewisch, Macmillan Lymphoma Clinical Nurse Specialist.

Types of complementary therapies

There are many different types of complementary therapies. Below, we outline some of the most popular types:

- **Acupuncture**
- **Aromatherapy**
- **Massage**
- **Creative therapies**
- **Meditation techniques.**

Acupuncture

Acupuncture uses very fine needles that are put into parts of your body at specific acupuncture points. These are defined areas of your skin that acupuncturists believe relate to certain parts of your body.

There are two main types of acupuncture:

- Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which is based on the idea that life force energy ('Chi' or 'Qi') flows through pathways ('meridians') in the body, but that these sometimes become blocked, weakened or unbalanced. TCM works to restore the flow.
- Western medical acupuncture, which is based on the idea that stimulating nerves in the skin and muscles releases chemicals, such as those that act as natural painkillers (endorphins).

Acupuncture is sometimes used to help manage pain. It is also used to relieve side effects of chemotherapy – **nausea and vomiting** and **treatment-related fatigue**.

In some cases, acupuncture is available on the NHS, through your GP, or in hospitals and pain clinics. Some **hospices** also offer acupuncture for free or at a reduced fee.

Acupuncture is generally considered to be safe if it's done by a trained professional. However, you should not have needles inserted over areas of your body affected by cancer.

You shouldn't have acupuncture if you:

- have a low white blood count (**neutropenia**), as you could be at an increased risk of infection
- have a bleeding disorder
- have a low platelet count (**thrombocytopenia**)
- are on blood thinning medication.

The NHS website has **more information about acupuncture**, including about how it works, its safety and what happens in a session.

The **British Acupuncture Council's** website has information about acupuncture, including a search tool to help you find an acupuncturist.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils, which come from plants and flowers. The idea is that the oils trigger reactions in your body when you smell them or when they're absorbed through your skin. Aromatherapy might have short-term positive effects on overall wellbeing by boosting relaxation, helping to manage stress and improving quality of sleep.

You usually have aromatherapy as:

- an aromatherapy massage treatment, where it might help to boost the relaxing effects of the massage
- a vapour to breathe in
- a liquid to spray into the air, or on to your clothes or pillow.

You can also use essential oils in other ways. For example, as candles or aroma sticks to smell, or as oils to burn with water in an oil burner.

Aromatherapy can also be used in the form of oils or salts that you add to a bath, but check first whether this is safe for you. Some products could cause an allergic reaction or increase your skin's **sensitivity to sunlight (photosensitivity)**. This risk can be higher after certain types of targeted drug treatment, some chemotherapy drugs and radiotherapy. Speak to a member of your medical team or your GP for advice specific to your situation.

The **Aromatherapy Council** has more information about aromatherapy, including links to help you **find an aromatherapist** in your area.

Massage

Massage uses various forms of touch and pressure on your body. Although the benefits are short-term, massage can boost mental wellbeing in various ways. It might help with relaxation, quality of sleep, reducing fatigue, and could help to manage stress and anxiety.

Generally, gentle massage is considered to be safe and there is no evidence to suggest that it will spread lymphoma through your body. If you are taking blood-thinning medication or have a low platelet count (**thrombocytopenia**), you are more prone to bruising. Your doctors might therefore advise against having a forceful massage.

If you would like to have a massage, check with a member of your medical team about any safety precautions you should consider. They can give you advice based on any other health conditions you have and any medication you are taking.

Doctors also generally advise people with cancer to:

- limit the length of the massage to 20 to 30 minutes if you have finished treatment in the last few months
- ask the therapist to keep the pressure light – avoid heavy massage techniques such as Swedish massage and Turkish massage
- ask your therapist to avoid areas of the body that are the focus of any treatment
- avoid pressure on **swollen lymph nodes**
- avoid pressure in any other areas of your body where you have cancer.

It's a good idea to seek massage from a therapist who has received specialist training in treating people with cancer – for example, an oncology massage therapist.

Mandy Barter, Complementary Therapist.

Remember that your skin might be sensitive after treatment, particularly if you have had radiotherapy. Massage could irritate your skin, especially if oils are used. Your medical team might therefore advise that you avoid massage.

You can [find a massage therapist](#) in your area on the [Council for Soft Tissue Therapies](#) (also known as the General Council for Massage Therapies, or GCMT) website.

Creative therapies

There are different types of creative therapies, including art (such as sculpture, painting, drawing), dance, drama and music. You don't need to consider yourself to be a creative person to have creative therapy.

Some people find that creative therapies help them make sense of feelings, and to express themselves. They might have an overall positive effect on your mood and reduce tiredness.

The Mind website has more information about [creative therapies and how to access them](#).

Meditation techniques

Meditation aims to increase mental and physical relaxation. There are many different types of meditation, including mindfulness and [yoga](#).

Mindfulness

Much of the time, we're busy thinking about what's already happened or what's yet to come. Mindfulness aims to help you be in the present moment. It encourages you to pay attention to your physical surroundings, to how your body feels and to thoughts as they come in and out of your mind.

There is some evidence that mindfulness has positive effects on psychological wellbeing in people with cancer, particularly with pain, anxiety and depression.

Mindfulness is generally considered to be safe, and you can do it by yourself at home. There are many resources, including videos, apps and podcasts that can guide you through mindfulness techniques.

It's still a good idea to talk to your doctor or clinical nurse specialist before trying mindfulness, particularly if you have experienced mental health difficulties in the past. This is because heightened focus could trigger difficult feelings. This doesn't mean that you can't do it – it might just be that you need to get advice from your nurse or GP to find something that's suitable for you. This might also include working with a professional mindfulness facilitator.

You can find out more about [mindfulness on the NHS website](#). The Mental Health Foundation website also has information about [mindfulness](#), including some [mindfulness podcasts](#).

Yoga

Yoga uses movements, stretching and breathing techniques alongside meditation and relaxation. There are lots of different types of yoga that vary in intensity and approach. If you're interested in trying yoga, you could find out more about the different types. You could speak to some yoga teachers about their approach, as well as whether they're trained to, and have experience in instructing people who have cancer.

You can do yoga at home using online tutorials once you know the basics. However, the NHS recommends that you go to a class or have some face-to-face instruction before trying to do it alone. If you're new to yoga, start with exercises that are for beginners. Some [Maggie's Centres](#) offer [exercise classes, including yoga](#).

Many people say that they find yoga helps them to feel good overall. There is evidence that yoga can have small but beneficial effects on quality of life, stress and wellbeing of people with cancer. More research is needed but it's possible that yoga might also reduce anxiety, joint pains, [depression](#) and [fatigue](#).

If you're interested in yoga, speak to your GP or a member of your medical team to check it's safe for you.

You can read more about [yoga on the NHS website](#).

Finding a therapist

Ask your medical team if they can recommend a therapist in your area. If not, a good place to search is the website of the professional organisation for your chosen type of therapy. Many have online search tools to help you find registered practitioners close to you.

Cancer Research UK has information about [where you can go for complementary therapy](#) and on [finding a therapist](#).

Given that much of complementary therapy is about your overall sense of wellbeing, it's important that you feel comfortable with the therapist and that the treatment room feels a pleasant environment to be in.

It's standard practice for therapists to take your doctor's details and ask about any medication you're on, so take a note of these with you when you have your first consultation.

Questions to ask therapists

You can often get the following information from a therapist's website or leaflets, or by asking them these questions:

- Are you registered with a professional organisation?
 - What training, qualifications and experience do you have?
 - Is it OK to swap your details with those of my hospital consultant and nurse, in case your or they have any queries about my treatment?
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Frequently asked questions about complementary therapy and lymphoma

In this section, we answer some frequently asked questions about complementary therapy and lymphoma.

Why is it important to speak to my doctor before trying a complementary therapy?

Always speak to a member of your medical team before you try a complementary therapy. This is important because there might be certain types that are unsafe for you. This might be the case if, for example, they could affect your lymphoma treatment, if you are pregnant, or if you have other health conditions.

How can I access a complementary therapy?

Ask your medical team what is available in your area. Some complementary therapies are available through the NHS in hospitals, GP surgeries or cancer centres. However, most of the time, complementary therapy is provided privately or through voluntary organisations such as [hospices](#) or [Maggie's Centres](#). Some health insurance policies also offer complementary therapies.

Cancer Research UK has a list of [complementary therapy resources and organisations](#).

How are complementary therapies regulated?

By law, no formal training or registration is required to practise complementary therapy, other than [osteopathy](#) and [chiropractic](#). However, many practitioners voluntarily register with relevant professional associations or with the [Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council](#) (CNHC), a regulatory body that publishes a [searchable record of registered practitioners](#).

By law, all osteopaths and chiropractors in the UK must be registered. Both are regulated by independent professional bodies. These are the [General Osteopathic Council](#) and the [General Chiropractic Council](#).

How are alternative therapies regulated?

In the UK, herbal medicines and homeopathic medicines are registered with the [Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulations Agency](#). Manufacturers must provide data on the safety and quality of the product and a summary of its traditional use. However, unlike conventional medicine, they do not have to provide any scientific evidence that the product works.

The UK does not allow herbal medicines or homeopathic medicines to be registered for the treatment of serious diseases such as cancer. Herbal medicines and homeopathic medicines bought from abroad might not be regulated and so might not have the quality and safety assurance of UK products.

Where can I find out more about complementary therapies?

There is a lot of information about health and complementary therapy and not all of it is reliable.

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) and **The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)** are independent regulators for complementary healthcare practitioners. You can use both of these websites to find out more about complementary therapies.

Cancer Research UK has [tips on finding reliable health information on the internet](#).

How much does complementary therapy cost?

The cost of treatment varies depending on factors such as the type of therapy, geographical location and duration of session. As a very rough guide, you might pay somewhere in the region of £40 to £60 per session.

References

The full list of references for this page is available on our website. Alternatively, email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

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✓	Evidence-based
✓	Approved by experts
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