

## Complementary therapy

This page is about complementary therapy – treatment that is used alongside mainstream treatment for lymphoma. Complementary therapy does not cure lymphoma but some types may improve your mental or physical wellbeing or relieve side effects.

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## What is complementary therapy?

Complementary therapy is treatment that's used *alongside* mainstream treatment for lymphoma (for example, **chemotherapy**, **radiotherapy** or **targeted treatments**). Complementary therapies do not cure lymphoma but some types of complementary therapy may help you feel better or improve your quality of life. Examples include **massage**, **aromatherapy**, **acupuncture** and **mindfulness**.

The use of complementary therapy has become much more popular in recent years and it is widely accepted by medical professionals. Many doctors support the use of complementary therapy in addition to conventional lymphoma treatment and may refer people to complementary therapy practitioners. Some cancer centres and general practices offer certain **types of complementary therapy**.

You might also hear the term 'alternative medicine' or 'alternative therapy', which is sometimes grouped with complementary therapy and called 'complementary and alternative medicine' (CAM). CAM is any product, process or supplement that is not considered mainstream treatment. CAMs are often based on traditional cultural theories and beliefs about health and illness.

Unlike complementary therapy, alternative therapies are used *instead of* conventional treatment. Examples include dietary supplements, herbal medicines and homeopathic remedies. Supporters might claim that these therapies can cure lymphoma. However, unlike conventional medicines, manufacturers don't need to prove that alternative therapies actually work – they are allowed to sell them on the basis that the product has been used as a traditional medicine for at least 30 years. **In the UK, no alternative therapies are registered for the treatment of lymphoma. There is no evidence that they are effective and they are not recommended by the NHS.** Some alternative therapies can also affect how well other drugs (for example, chemotherapy) work.

This information page focuses on complementary therapies.

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## Complementary therapy for lymphoma

Studies in the US found that between 7 and 9 in every 10 people with lymphoma have used some form of complementary or alternative therapy. The most common choices of complementary therapy are **chiropractic care, massage**, relaxation and meditation techniques such as **mindfulness**. Some people also try herbal remedies, such as herbal tea, garlic, Echinacea or flaxseed, in addition to lymphoma treatment.

Most people use complementary therapy to help control their symptoms, cope with side effects and improve their general wellbeing. Many people also feel it boosts their immune system and helps their body to heal, although there is little scientific evidence to support this. Using complementary therapy gives people a feeling of control over their health.

Complementary therapies cannot cure your lymphoma – be suspicious of promises that they can or might. Many people do find they help them to relax and cope with their feelings and emotions though.

Some research suggests that complementary therapies may help to:

- control symptoms such as **nausea** (feeling sick)
  - reduce your sense of pain
  - reduce **fatigue**
  - lessen feelings of anxiety and **depression**
  - improve your overall psychological wellbeing
  - reduce **stress**.
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## Types of complementary therapy

There are over 100 types of CAM, including physical, psychological and pharmacological therapies. They can be broadly grouped into:

- **touch therapies** – for example, massage, aromatherapy, reflexology, osteopathy, chiropractic care
- **mind–body therapies** – for example, mindfulness, yoga, relaxation techniques, prayer
- **traditional medical therapies** – for example, acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy
- **biologically-based therapies** – for example, diets, herbs, vitamins
- **energy therapies** – for example, reiki, magnet treatment.

Generally speaking, more research is needed into CAMs and how they could help people living with cancer. Below are some of the most common types of complementary therapy and how they might help you.

### Acupuncture

Acupuncture uses fine needles, which are inserted into parts of your body. It can be based on traditional Chinese medicine that aims to rebalance the flow of energy through your body. There is also a version of acupuncture that is based on targeting symptoms.

There is some evidence that acupuncture may help reduce **nausea and vomiting** as side effects of chemotherapy when used alongside standard anti-sickness medicine. It may also provide some relief of pain and cancer-related **fatigue**, but the evidence for this is limited.

Sometimes, acupuncture is offered by the NHS but mostly you will have to pay for it. As with all complementary therapies, speak to a member of your medical team before you decide whether to have acupuncture.

Around 1 in 10 people experience pain or bleeding where the acupuncture needle is inserted. If you have a **low platelet** or **low white blood cell count**, you may be at greater risk of bleeding or infection but serious complications of acupuncture are very rare even in people with low blood counts.

The **British Acupuncture Council** has more information about how acupuncture could help you. There is also an online search tool to help you find an acupuncturist.

## Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils (that come from plants and flowers) to improve physical and psychological wellbeing. They are usually offered as part of a massage treatment or as a vapour to breathe. Essential oils can also be added to baths but this isn't recommended because it coats the whole body in oils.

Aromatherapy is thought to work by stimulating areas of the brain involved in physical activation and emotion. It may also stimulate the immune system.

Aromatherapy is mainly used to enhance the relaxation effect of a massage. There is evidence that this may also reduce anxiety and pain in people with cancer, and possibly improve **fatigue, depression, sleep disturbance** and overall quality of life. These effects are short-term.

Although essential oils are generally safe when used in appropriate dilutions, allergic reactions can occur. Let your practitioner know if you have any allergies and ask them for a list of oil ingredients if you think you could be allergic.

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

## Art therapy

Art therapy helps people to express their thoughts and feelings through art forms such as painting, sculpture, drama, poetry and dance. There is little research into how art therapy helps people affected by cancer but some studies show it reduces tiredness. People have also reported that it helps to improve their emotional wellbeing.

You will find more information about art therapy and [finding an art therapist](#) on [The British Association of Art Therapists \(BAAT\)](#) website.

## Chiropractic care

Chiropractic care involves manually moving and realigning the spine and other joints. It is usually used to treat problems affecting the bones, joints and muscles.

People with cancer sometimes try chiropractic care to help control pain, headaches and tension. There is some scientific evidence to suggest that chiropractic care might help relieve headaches, neck and back pain, although the studies did not include people with cancer.

Chiropractic care can cause temporary muscle soreness or increases in pain. Serious adverse effects of chiropractic care are rare.

Find out more about chiropractic care and [find a chiropractor](#) on the [General Chiropractic Council](#) website.

## Massage

Massage is a popular complementary therapy that uses touch and pressure to work the muscles and soft tissues. Massage stimulates the skin, blood, and [lymphatic system](#), which boosts blood circulation, aids muscle relaxation, and soothes nerves. It does not treat or cure your lymphoma.

There is some evidence that massage may reduce pain and anxiety in people with cancer. It may also improve quality of life and some symptoms, such as [nausea](#), [stress](#), [fatigue](#), anger and [depression](#).

The benefits of each massage only last for a short time but many people say they feel very relaxed during and after a massage. Some people find they have a more restful night's [sleep](#) afterwards and that they feel better in general. How frequently it is safe to have a massage will depend on your individual circumstances and the type of massage you are having. Speak to a member of your medical team for further advice.

Massage is generally safe for people with cancer. You should not have a forceful massage if you have a [low platelet count](#) or are taking blood-thinning medication in order to avoid bruising.

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.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a popular type of meditation that encourages you to slow down and take note of your body and thoughts, as well as the world around you. You can practise mindfulness by yourself at home. You may find it helpful to use videos, apps or audio recordings.

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

Mindfulness is generally considered to be safe for people with cancer.

[NHS Choices](#) provide more information about mindfulness. Podcasts about mindfulness, including some short mindfulness exercises, are also provided by the [Mental Health Foundation](#). You can also find [mindfulness podcasts for people with blood cancer](#) on the AbbVie Pharmaceutical Research and Development website.

## Music therapy

The idea behind music therapy is that we all respond to music. Music therapists help people to connect with music as a way of expressing themselves positively.

There is evidence that music therapy may help people living with cancer by lowering pain levels, anxiety, depression and [fatigue](#). It may also help to lift your mood and improve your quality of life.

Read how music helped [Reem](#) cope with chemotherapy.

You can learn more about music therapy and [find a therapist](#) on the [British Association for Music Therapy \(BAMT\)](#) website.

## Tai chi

Tai chi is a gentle martial art that combines breathing techniques with sequences of slow, graceful movements. It is a moderate form of aerobic exercise.

There is limited evidence that tai chi may increase mobility and improve quality of life in people with cancer.

Tai chi is generally considered safe. If you have a heart condition or musculoskeletal problems, ask your medical team if tai chi is suitable for you.

For more information about tai chi and to [find a tai chi instructor](#) near you, visit the [Tai Chi Union](#) website. Some [Maggie's Centres](#) offer free tai chi classes for people with cancer.

## Yoga

Yoga combines physical exercise, stretching and breathing techniques with meditation and relaxation. It is taught in yoga classes but it can also be practised at home once you know the basics. There are lots of different types of yoga and it can be confusing to find one that's right for you. It's a good idea to speak to the teacher in advance to find out if their practice is suitable for someone with lymphoma.

There is evidence that yoga has small beneficial effects on quality of life, stress and well-being of people with cancer. It may also reduce anxiety, [depression](#) and [fatigue](#), although the evidence is limited.

Yoga is generally safe when practised appropriately. If you are new to yoga, make sure you start with exercises that are aimed at beginners and work with a teacher who has been appropriately trained in remedial yoga (a personalised type of yoga to help people cope with a specific health condition). Don't push yourself to do more than feels comfortable.

[NHS Choices](#) has more information about yoga, including links to help you find a yoga class near you. Some [Maggie's Centres](#) offer free yoga classes for people with cancer.

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## Choosing complementary therapy

Choosing a complementary therapy is often a case of seeing what appeals to you and perhaps trying a few. [Massage](#) and [aromatherapy](#) are popular types of complementary therapy for people living with cancer.

Make sure you get your information about complementary therapy from reliable sources.

- Use information from well-known, trusted organisations (for example, the professional bodies representing different complementary therapies).
- Check that any claims are backed up by scientific proof.
- Try to find out if the information has been reviewed by experts. (Articles published in medical journals are reviewed by other medical professionals. Websites should state if their information is reviewed by experts.)
- Make sure the information is up-to-date – look for publication dates in books and leaflets and review dates on websites.
- Check the credentials of websites. Who runs them? What are their qualifications? Would they benefit from you using their services?
- Be wary of information from websites that are selling something.

## Before trying complementary therapy

Always consult your medical team before you try a complementary therapy. They might be able to help with choosing one – you could ask if they can suggest a certain type based on your needs and preferences.

Speak to your medical team before buying any herbal treatments to make sure that it is safe for you to take. Do not buy herbal treatments from the internet – the quality may vary and they may not always be safe.

## Questions to ask your medical team

- What complementary therapy might be suitable for me? (This may depend on what you hope it will do – for example, reduce stress, deal with **symptoms** or cope with **side effects**.)
- Will complementary therapy interfere with my lymphoma treatment?
- Can you recommend any complementary therapy practitioners?

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## Finding a complementary therapy practitioner

Once you have decided what complementary therapy you'd like to try, 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.



The **Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council** has a searchable list of registered practitioners covering a range of therapy types.

## Questions to ask therapists

- What type of therapy do you practise?
- What training and qualifications do you have?
- What experience do you have?
- Are you registered with a professional organisation?
- Do you have appropriate insurance that allows you to provide treatment for people with lymphoma?
- Do you treat other people with lymphoma?
- Do you support conventional cancer treatments?
- Will you work with my doctor?

## Questions to ask yourself

- Am I comfortable with this person?
- Do I like the clinic or treatment room?
- Is the location convenient for me to get to?
- Can I get appointments at a time that suit me?
- Can I afford the fees?

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## Availability of complementary therapy

In the UK, complementary therapy is mainly provided privately or through voluntary organisations such as hospices or **Maggie's Centres**. Some complementary therapies are available through the NHS in hospitals, GP surgeries or cancer centres. Ask your medical team what is available in your area.

Herbal remedies and homeopathy are not available on the NHS.

Some health insurance policies cover complementary treatments carried out by regulated practitioners. If you have health insurance, check the wording of your policy to find out what it covers.

## Regulation of complementary therapy

Osteopaths and chiropractors are regulated by independent professional bodies (the [General Osteopathic Council](#) and the [General Chiropractic Council](#)). Only qualified practitioners are granted registration and they must regularly demonstrate continued fitness to practise. By law, all osteopaths and chiropractors in the UK must be registered.

By law, no formal training or registration is required to practise other forms of complementary therapy. 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](#).

In the UK, herbal medicines and homeopathic medicines are registered with the [Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulations Agency](#). To register a product, manufacturers must provide data on the safety and quality of the product and a summary of its traditional use, but 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 may not be regulated and may not have the quality and safety assurance of UK products.

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## FAQs

### Is it safe to have a massage?

People with lymphoma often ask whether it is safe to have a massage – they worry that it could spread the lymphoma through their body. To date, there is no evidence that gentle massage is unsafe. A typical foot massage, for example, is only equivalent to walking on a pebbly beach. Check with your nurse or doctor about whether it is safe for you to have a massage at this time. They will take into account any other health conditions you have that could make massage unsuitable for you.

In general, doctors advise you to:

- Limit your massages to 20 to 30 minutes if you have finished treatment in the last few months.
- Avoid areas of the body that are the focus of any active treatment (for example, radiotherapy).
- Ask the therapist to keep the pressure light – avoid heavy massage techniques such as Swedish massage and Turkish massage.
- Avoid direct pressure on enlarged lymph nodes or other tumour sites.
- Remember that your skin might be sensitive. For example, if you have had **radiotherapy**, massage could irritate your skin, especially if oils are used.
- Be aware that if your blood **platelet count is low** (a common side effect of **chemotherapy** treatment), you might bruise easily.

## How much does complementary therapy cost?

The cost of treatment varies from place to place but an approximate guide for some of the more popular types of complementary therapy is listed below (based on 2016 to 2018 prices).

- Acupuncture: £25 to £50 per session (typically 30 to 60 minutes). The first consultation may cost more.
- Aromatherapy: £50 to £90 per session (typically 60 to 90 minutes).
- Chiropractic care: £30 to £80 per session (typically 30 to 60 minutes).
- Massage: £20 to £60 per session (typically 30 to 60 minutes).
- Yoga: £10 to £15 per class (typically 60 to 90 minutes).

There may be a local cancer centre, hospice or charity that offers complementary therapies free of charge. Speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) or key worker to see if they know of any near to where you live.

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We have separate information about the topics in **bold font**. Please get in touch if you'd like to request copies or if you would like further information about any aspect of lymphoma. Phone 0808 808 5555 or email [information@lymphoma-action.org.uk](mailto:information@lymphoma-action.org.uk).

## References

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

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