

Complementary therapy for lymphoma

Complementary therapy doesn't treat lymphoma, but some people find it helps to improve how they feel overall. This information is about some of the most popular types and where to find out more about them.

This information focuses on complementary therapy. You might also hear the term 'alternative medicine'. This is different to complementary therapy in that alternative medicine is used instead of standard hospital treatment. Sometimes, the two approaches are grouped together as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). This information focuses on complementary therapy.

On this page

[What is complementary therapy?](#)

[Acupuncture](#)

[Aromatherapy](#)

[Massage](#)

[Mindfulness](#)

[Yoga](#)

[Art and other creative therapies](#)

[Tips on finding and working with a complementary therapist](#)

[Frequently asked questions about complementary therapy and lymphoma](#)

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.

What is complementary therapy?

Complementary therapy can be used as well as (not instead of) mainstream [treatment for lymphoma](#). Some people find it helps to improve their general sense of wellbeing.

What types of complementary therapies are there?

There are lots of different types of complementary therapies. We cover some of the most popular types in this information.

- [Acupuncture](#)
- [Aromatherapy](#)
- [Massage](#)
- [Mindfulness](#)
- [Yoga](#)
- [Art and other creative therapies](#).

Why do people use complementary therapy?

According to Cancer Research UK, around 30 to 40% of people with cancer use an alternative or complementary therapy.

Some of the reasons people try a complementary therapy include to:

- help control [symptoms of lymphoma](#)
- ease [side effects of treatment](#) such as [feeling or being sick \(nausea\)](#) and [extreme tiredness \(fatigue\)](#)
- improve overall sense of wellbeing, for example, to help [manage stress](#) and to improve mood.

There is more information below about how some of the popular individual complementary therapies might help.

Acupuncture

With acupuncture, you have fine needles put into acupuncture points (places on your body thought to link to other parts of your body).

There are two main types of acupuncture, which are based on different beliefs about physical wellbeing:

- In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the acupuncturist aims to restore the flow of energy ('Chi' or 'Qi') through pathways (meridians) in your body if it has become disrupted.
- With Western medical acupuncture (which is also known as dry needling), the acupuncturist stimulates your skin and muscles to release chemicals. This can include the hormones (endorphins) that help to lower pain or [stress](#).

How might acupuncture help?

Some of the reasons people with cancer use acupuncture to try to help manage pain, treatment-related [sickness \(nausea and vomiting\)](#) and [cancer-related fatigue](#).

Is acupuncture safe?

In general, the NHS states that acupuncture is generally very safe if it is done by a qualified practitioner. However, it is important to check with your medical team before having acupuncture in case it is not safe for you.

You might be advised not to have acupuncture in some circumstances. For example, lowered blood counts ([neutropenia](#), [thrombocytopenia](#) or [anaemia](#)) can be a side effect of cancer treatment and can increase your risk of bruising, bleeding or infection. You might therefore be advised not to have acupuncture until your blood counts have returned to safer levels.

Where can I find out more about acupuncture and how to access it?

The NHS website has [more information about acupuncture](#), including about how it works, its safety and what happens in a session.

You might be able to get acupuncture on the NHS through your GP surgery, hospital, and pain clinics. Some [hospices](#) also offer acupuncture for free or at a reduced fee.

In general, however, NHS access to acupuncture is limited – you are more likely to need to pay privately for it.

On the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care website, you can use the [online search tool to find an acupuncturist](#).

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses oils (known as essential oils) that come from plants and flowers. The idea is that they trigger reactions in your body, either when you smell them or when you absorb them through your skin.

You can use aromatherapy oils in different ways, including as a massage oil, or to breathe in (for example, as a spray, candle or diffuser). Aromatherapy oils can also be used in the form of bath salts or oils.

How might aromatherapy help?

Some people find that aromatherapy has short-term positive effects on their overall wellbeing. For example, it could help to improve mood, relaxation, quality of sleep and stress management. It might also reduce [sickness \(nausea and vomiting\)](#) and pain.

Is aromatherapy safe?

Speak to a member of your medical team or your GP for advice specific to your situation, including if you are pregnant and would like to try aromatherapy.

Aromatherapy is generally considered to be harmless for most people if the oils are used in a safe way. However, 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](#).

Where can I find out more about aromatherapy and how to access it?

The [Aromatherapy Council](#) has more information about aromatherapy.

You might be able to access aromatherapy for free through your hospital or clinic. However, most of the time you would need to pay privately for aromatherapy.

Massage

Massage uses touch and pressure on your body to improve wellbeing. This can include kneading, rubbing and tapping. There are lots of different types of massage.

How might massage help?

Some people use massage to help improve emotional wellbeing in various ways. It might give short-term benefits in terms of relaxation, quality of sleep, reducing **fatigue**, and could help to **manage stress** and anxiety.

Is massage safe?

Speak to a member of your medical team or your GP for advice about whether massage is safe for you – there might be safety precautions they recommend, for example:

- 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 a forceful massage.
- 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.
- If you are taking medication for any other health conditions, there could be other considerations and precautions that your doctors advise you on.

Doctors also generally advise people with cancer to:

- Ask the therapist to keep the pressure light. Avoid heavy massage techniques such as deep tissue or a Swedish massage – a relaxing or aromatherapy massage might be a good alternative.
- 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.

Generally, gentle massage is considered to be safe. Some people have questioned whether massage can spread lymphoma throughout the body. There isn't any evidence to suggest that this is the case.

Where can I find out more about massage and how to access it?

You can find a massage therapist in your area on the [Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care](#) website.

Mindfulness

The aim of mindfulness is to help you focus on the present moment, rather than what's happened and what is yet to come.

**Mindfulness involves paying attention to what is going on inside
and outside ourselves, moment by moment.**
NHS, 2022

Although thoughts will come into your mind, the idea is to really notice what is happening now – this includes in your physical surroundings (for example, what you can smell, see and hear) and to acknowledge any feelings within your body.

How might mindfulness help?

There is some evidence that mindfulness has positive effects on psychological wellbeing in people with cancer. For example, it might help with managing pain, anxiety, distress and depression.

Is mindfulness safe?

Mindfulness is generally considered to be safe. However, it is still a good idea to talk to your doctor or clinical nurse specialist before trying mindfulness. For example, if you have experienced mental health difficulties in the past, heightened focus could trigger challenging feelings. This doesn't mean that you can't do it – it might just be that your nurse or GP can help to find something that's suitable for you, including working with a professional mindfulness facilitator.

Where can I find out more about mindfulness and how to access it?

You can find out more about [mindfulness on the NHS website](#). The Mind website also has [information about mindfulness](#) including [how and where to learn mindfulness](#) and some [mindfulness exercises and tips](#).

The Mental Health Foundation website also has [information about mindfulness](#), including signposts to formal courses and free resources.

Yoga

There are lots of different types of yoga. The practice uses movements, stretching and breathing techniques alongside meditation and relaxation.

How might yoga help?

Many people say that they find yoga helps them to improve their sense of wellbeing – for example, helping them to feel calm and relaxed. There is evidence that yoga can have small 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](#).

Is yoga safe?

Yoga is generally considered to be safe. However, there are many different types that vary in intensity and approach – if you're interested in yoga, speak to your GP or a member of your medical team to check it's safe for you.

Where can I find out more about yoga and how to access it?

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 working with people who have cancer.

There is [information about yoga on the NHS website](#). 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. This helps to ensure that you have the technique correct and could minimise the risk of injuring yourself.

You can also find more from the charity [The British Wheel of Yoga](#). Their website has information for anyone wanting to explore yoga.

Art and other creative therapies

There are different types of creative therapies. You don't need to be experienced or think of yourself as creative to try a creative therapy.

Examples of creative therapies include:

- art (such as sculpture, painting, drawing)
- dance
- drama
- music.

How might art and other creative therapies help?

Some people find that these types of therapies help them to make sense of feelings and to express themselves. They might also help you to feel more relaxed and connected to the world around you, improve your mood and reduce tiredness.

Where can I find out more about creative therapies and how to access them?

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

Tips on finding and working with a complementary therapist

It's a good idea to talk to your medical team to get their view on any types of complementary therapy you are thinking of trying – as well as advising you about the safety of them, they might also offer suggestions about other options and how to access them.

- Ask your medical team if they can recommend a therapist in your area – this could be through local charities and hospices.
- Use the Cancer Research UK website to find out [where you can go for complementary therapy](#) and for information about [finding a therapist](#).

- Find out what the professional organisation for the type of therapy you are interested in is. Many have online search tools to help you find registered practitioners close to you.
- Consider the setting – as well as finding a therapist you feel comfortable with, the physical surroundings are also important.

What information should I try to find out about 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 and qualifications do you have?
- Have you got experience of providing a complementary therapy for people who have been diagnosed with cancer?
- Is it OK for me to give your details to my hospital consultant and nurse, in case they have any queries they would like to contact you about?

Cancer Research UK has more [tips on what to consider when looking for a complementary therapist](#).

What information should I give therapists?

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.

Cancer Research UK has information about the various [individual alternative and complementary therapies](#) including their safety to people with cancer.

Frequently asked questions about complementary therapy and lymphoma

In this section, we answer some frequently asked questions about complementary therapy and lymphoma. Talk to a member of your medical team for advice specific to your situation.

Why should I talk to my doctor before trying a complementary therapy?

Certain types of complementary therapy might not be suitable for you, or not straightaway. For example, some could affect your lymphoma treatment or be unsafe if you have another health condition or are pregnant.

Where can I go for complementary therapy?

Some complementary therapies are available through the NHS in hospitals, GP surgeries or cancer centres.

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.

A good starting point is to talk to your GP or a member of your medical team if you'd like to look for a potential complementary therapist in your area.

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

How are complementary therapies regulated?

Many practitioners choose to register with the [Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#) or another relevant professional association. However, by UK law, only [osteopaths](#) and [chiropractors](#) require formal training and registration to practise.

How much does complementary therapy cost?

Costs vary depending on the type of therapy, geographical location and how long the session lasts. Some practitioners charge more for an initial, longer consultation session.

What is alternative therapy?

Alternative therapies are generally used **instead** of mainstream treatments. Often, they are based on traditional cultural beliefs about health and wellbeing. Examples include dietary supplements, herbal medicines and [homeopathy](#).

Alternative therapies aren't recommended by the NHS because:

- they could affect how other treatments (such as chemotherapy) work
- there is a lack of evidence that they work
- they could cause harmful side effects.

If you're thinking about using an alternative therapy, check with your medical team or your GP if it is suitable for you – even if you have used it in the past.

Regulation of alternative therapies

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?

The [Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#) and the [Health and Care Professions Council \(HCPC\)](#) are independent regulators for complementary healthcare practitioners. Both have information about complementary therapies and search tools to help you find a regulated practitioner.

Cancer Research UK also has [tips on finding high quality information about complementary and alternative therapy on the internet](#).

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.

Acknowledgements

- Barbara von Barsewisch, Haematology CNS, North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust, London.
- We would like to thank the members of our Reader Panel who gave their time to review this information.

Content last reviewed: July 2024

Next planned review: July 2027

LYMweb0042CompTherapy2024v5

© Lymphoma Action



Company Registration No 03518755

Charity Registration (England and Wales) No 1068395 (Scotland) No SC045850

Tell us what you think and help us to improve our resources for people affected by lymphoma. If you have any feedback, please visit lymphoma-action.org.uk/Feedback or email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

All our information is available without charge. If you have found it useful and would like to make a donation to support our work you can do so on our website lymphoma-action.org.uk/Donate. Our information could not be produced without support from people like you. Thank you.

Disclaimer

This disclaimer applies to, but is not limited to, Lymphoma Action information on website, videos across all platforms, webinars, podcasts and throughout all our services provision.

Although we make all reasonable efforts to ensure our content and the services we deliver are accurate and up-to-date at the time of production and delivery, we make no representations, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that the content is accurate, complete or up-to-date, particularly in relation to medical research which is constantly changing.

Our content has been developed for people living in the UK and is provided for general information only and primarily for personal and educational use. It is not intended to amount to advice on which you should rely and should not be considered or taken as a replacement for medical advice. You must obtain

professional, medical or specialist advice before taking, or refraining from, any action on the basis of our content.

Lymphoma Action cannot accept liability for any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in our information or third party information referenced in it.