

INFORMATION

information

 Arthritis

VICTORIA

inc. OSTEOPOROSIS VICTORIA

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES AND ARTHRITIS

What are complementary therapies?

The phrases “complementary” therapies or alternative therapies cover a broad range of healing philosophies, approaches and therapies outside of mainstream western medicine. Alternative therapies usually refer to those which are used instead of mainstream medicine. Complementary therapies refer to those used along with or in support of your usual mainstream treatments. Arthritis Victoria believes that the approach of complementary therapies is more advisable as it takes advantage of the proven benefits of conventional medicine.

Are complementary therapies safe?

Most have not undergone rigorous scientific analysis, unlike conventional medicine. This means these therapies may be safe and effective, unsafe and ineffective or questionable. This is why it is important to evaluate what we hear or read about a treatment so that we can make an informed decision. This is important for both complementary therapies and mainstream medicine.

Proven versus unproven treatments

Generally speaking, proven treatments or therapies are those which meet the following:

- Proven that the benefits outweigh the risks
- Proven in repeated studies with large numbers of people
- Proven with the use of a control group. A control group is a group of people who do not have a particular treatment compared with a group of similar people who do. This helps to show that any results are due to the treatment and not some other factor.
- Proven treatments clearly identify their risks, side effects and potential interactions with other treatments you may be having. Examples of proven treatments are the pharmaceutical drugs that your doctor prescribes.

A do no harm approach

With any treatment or therapy, a do no harm approach is a good place to start. Ideally, aim for a treatment that meets the following:

- The benefits are greater than the risks
- The side effects are listed (even natural products can have side effects or interact with other treatments you are taking)
- Taking this treatment or therapy does not stop you or delay you from seeking treatment from your doctor
- You are not asked to give up your current effective treatments
- The treatment or therapy is something you can afford and is readily available.

Before you start

In order to protect yourself we recommend doing the following:

- Get an accurate diagnosis. It is important to know exactly what type of arthritis you have (there are over 150 different types!)
- Talk to your doctor. Find out what they know about the treatment and if the treatment is likely to interact with anything you are already taking
- Get information. Keep in mind that the information given to you by the person promoting the product or therapy may not be proven. As well as your doctor or rheumatologist (specialist in arthritis) try your local library, your pharmacist (the information that comes inside your medication packet) and Arthritis Victoria.
- Check qualifications. If there is a practitioner or therapist involved check that they have a license or certificate. Are they certified by a professional organisation? Where did they get their training?

Warning signs to questionable therapies

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

- A cure is offered. A legitimate cure for arthritis would become known world wide very quickly!
- The cure, treatment or therapy is described as secret. Legitimate therapists and practitioners share their knowledge so that their peers can review their findings.
- Proof for the treatment relies on testimonials (personal stories).
- The treatment is only publicised in the back pages of magazines, through direct mail, over the phone or through TV advertisements.

Working with your doctor

It is true that not all doctors approve of complementary therapies. You may feel concerned that your doctor will disapprove. However many doctors work with complementary medicine therapists and may be able to help steer you towards a good practitioner. It is very important to keep your doctor informed. Your doctor can't give you the best professional advice without knowing all the treatments you are taking. This includes vitamin supplements, herbal medicines and exercise programs. If your doctor appears negative about an alternative treatment ask for a detailed explanation. If your doctor doesn't know about the treatment or therapy you wish to try, offer the information you have. Expect the same from your complementary medicine therapist.

Once you have started

In order to determine if a therapy you've chosen is working for you, it may help to keep a diary. Write down any change in symptoms for a month (remember to include medication changes, changes in exercise regimes and anything else that could affect your symptoms). After a month, you may have an idea about whether the therapy is actually of benefit to you and will be able to discuss this with your doctor.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Resource Centre

- Bruce, Debra Fulghum 1998, *The unofficial guide to alternative medicine*, Macmillan General Reference, New York NY.
- Chaitow, Leon 2002, *Conquer pain: The natural way: How to break the pain cycle and regain control of your life*, Duncan Baird Publishers, London.
- Dillard, James and Ziporyn, Terra 1998, *Alternative medicine for dummies: A reference for the rest of us!*, IDG Books Worldwide, Foster City, CA.
- Foltz-Gray, Dorothy 2005, *Alternative treatments for arthritis: An A-Z guide: The ultimate guide to herbs, supplements, bodywork and other complementary treatments for arthritis*, Arthritis Foundation of America, Atlanta, GA.
- Lam, Paul and Horstman, Judith 2002, *Overcoming arthritis: A holistic plan including a unique tai chi programme to relieve pain and restore mobility*, Dorling Kindersley, Melbourne.

***All listed books are available on loan from the Arthritis Victoria Resource Centre to members. If you would like to find out more about becoming a member, call: (03) 8531 8000.**

Websites

- Arthritis Victoria www.arthritisvic.org.au
- National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (USA) www.nccam.nih.gov
- National Library of Medicine (USA) Medlineplus. www.medlineplus.gov
- Arthritis Foundation of America www.arthritis.org
- Complementary Medicine Association—UK www.the-cma.org.uk/

ARTHRITIS VICTORIA

If you would like further information please contact our telephone information service on
(03) 8531 8000 or **1800 011 041** (country callers)



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Prepared by Education & Services staff, Arthritis Victoria, November 2002. This material is for your information and is not intended to be medical advice. You are encouraged to review the information provided with your doctor or relevant health professional.