

Asthma and complementary therapies

There are many complementary therapies that are available to people with asthma. Some people find these therapies helpful, but keep in mind that there hasn't been a great deal of research into alternative asthma treatments. No one knows for certain how effective they are, so be wary of miraculous claims.

If you decide to try one of the following treatments, talk it over with your doctor first and be guided by their experience. These therapies are designed to complement, or add to, your existing medical treatment – not replace it. Never abandon your medication and mainstream management techniques.

Acupuncture

This is the ancient Chinese treatment of inserting very fine needles into specific parts of the body to influence the flow of energy. Some studies show that:

- Acupuncture can give short-term relief from asthma symptoms
- No long-term benefits have been documented yet
- People whose asthma is triggered by allergens benefit more than those who experience exercise induced asthma.

Buteyko method

This is a set of breathing exercises based on the theory that people with asthma lose too much carbon dioxide through overbreathing. Research has shown that following the use of the Buteyko method, there was no improvement in lung function. However, a number of studies have shown that the Buteyko method can be helpful enough to allow some people with asthma to reduce their reliever medication use.

More research is needed and it is advisable to remain on your medication and speak to your doctor before commencing the Buteyko method.

Chiropractic

This is expert manipulation of the spine. Some research has shown that chiropractic has a beneficial effect on airway circulation and lung capacity. As with other complementary therapies, more research is needed in this area.

Herbal therapy

Some beneficial herbs include ginkgo biloba, tylophora asthmatica and saiboku-to. More research is needed because their effects aren't fully understood. Herbs can be powerful and should be treated with as much respect as pharmaceutical drugs. There can be a lack of control over the quantity and quality of herbal ingredients. Always discuss the use of herbs with your doctor first before making a decision.

Homeopathy

This includes preparing a special medicine containing tiny amounts of the allergic substance. The patient then takes the medicine and 'trains' their immune system to recognise the allergen as safe. Research has shown that homeopathy may be helpful for some people with asthma. One drawback is trying to pinpoint the exact allergen since most people with asthma have more than one.

Hypnosis

This is a deep state of relaxation that allows the patient to focus their complete attention on one thing or idea. Hypnosis is helpful in some cases, particularly for reducing stress, but not all people can be hypnotised. Relaxation techniques such as meditation or visualisation could be worthwhile if stress is a trigger.

Supplements

Vitamin C, the mineral magnesium and fish oils have found to be helpful in some studies, but not in others. Always discuss these treatments with your doctor.

Yoga

This is an ancient Indian practice using postures and movements, performed in time with the breath. One form of yoga, Pranayama exercises, has been studied and found to be effective in reducing asthma attacks and making the person less sensitive to certain allergens or triggers. This may relate to the relaxation aspect of yoga.

Don't take echinacea or royal jelly

People with asthma should never take echinacea or royal jelly. They can have serious side effects for people with asthma and other allergies. Severe reactions may include:

- Asthma attacks
- Breathing difficulties
- Severe allergic reaction
- Death.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local pharmacist
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. 1800 645 130 or (03) 9326 7088

Things to remember

- Complementary therapies should never replace your asthma medication and usual treatment.
- The limited research on complementary therapies means that no one is sure of their exact effect or worth.
- Always discuss complementary therapies first with your doctor.

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Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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