
Multiple sclerosis - complementary therapies

The nerves of the central nervous system are sheathed in myelin, a substance that assists in nerve function. Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an incurable disease of the central nervous system that inflames the myelin and causes plaques or lesions to appear. The brain, spinal cord and optic nerves can be affected.

The principle aims of drug therapy for MS are to shorten the duration of relapses or attacks, ease specific symptoms and slow the progression of disease by reducing the rate of relapses. The types of drugs used in treatment depend on a number of factors, including the form of MS a person has.

There is a range of complementary therapies that can work alongside a person's medical treatment by helping to ease symptoms. However, caution should be exercised. Some treatments are beneficial, but others are simply a waste of time and money. Be advised by your doctor and other health care providers, as some complementary treatments can have negative interactions with traditional medications you may be taking.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a therapy of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Slender needles are inserted into the skin at particular points and, according to the theory, help to balance the person's Qi (pronounced 'chee') energy. While Western science can't explain how acupuncture works, numerous studies have found it is an effective treatment for a host of conditions. Acupuncture can help ease MS-related pain and reduce the severity of muscle spasms.

Massage

There are various types of massage including Shiatsu, Swedish massage and acupressure. The skin is the largest organ of the body and is packed with nerve endings that respond to touch. Massage works by soothing the skin and relaxing tense muscles. Regular massages can help a person with MS to better manage muscle pain.

Yoga

There are many different varieties of yoga, but each one relies on structured poses (asanas) timed with breathing (prayanama). Yoga can help relieve stress, because concentrating on the postures and breathing acts as a powerful form of meditation. The gentle sustained stretches also help to improve flexibility and reduce muscle stiffness.

Chiropractic

Back pain is a common problem for people with MS, exacerbated by weakened leg muscles. Chiropractic practice is recognised as an effective treatment for back pain and injury. The basic principle of chiropractic is that spinal manipulation can help musculoskeletal problems, such as back pain, as well as improving a person's general state of health.

Meditation

Meditation is the deliberate clearing of one's mind in order to promote a sense of calm and heightened awareness. During meditation, the brain produces alpha waves. This brain state has been found to promote relaxation of the entire nervous system. Meditation is a powerful stress management therapy.

Evening primrose oil and fish oil supplements

Some studies suggest that evening primrose oil and fish oil supplements can measurably reduce the severity and length of an MS attack. However, these supplements don't seem to influence the frequency of attacks.

Dubious therapies

The following complementary therapies, which are alleged to help people with MS, have been shown through clinical testing to be ineffective:

- **Replacing mercury dental fillings** – mercury in dental fillings has been incorrectly blamed for causing MS. This claim was made because mercury poisoning affects the brain and can cause symptoms similar to MS, such as muscle tremors.
- **Hyperbaric oxygen therapy** – this means inhaling oxygen under pressure. Studies around the world have found that hyperbaric oxygen therapy has no effect on either MS symptoms or disease progression.
- **Vitamin supplements** – high doses of vitamin or mineral supplements have no demonstrable influence on MS.
- **Special diets** – there is no evidence that dietary factors contribute to the development of MS. Like anyone else, a person with MS should eat a well-balanced high fibre, low fat diet that includes fresh fruits, vegetables, cereals, lean meats and dairy products.

Be advised by your doctor

Your health care providers should keep abreast of MS research and let you know when clinically proven new treatments are developed. Remember, there is currently no cure for MS.

Be cautious when investigating a complementary therapy and be sceptical of 'miracle cure' claims. Always ask your doctor for advice before starting any complementary treatment, as some complementary treatments may have negative interactions with the traditional medications you may be taking.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Complementary health care providers
- MS Australia-ACT/NSW/VIC Tel. (03) 9845 2700 or Freecall MS Connect™ Tel. 1800 042 138 or email: msconnect@msaustralia.org.au

Things to remember

- Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an incurable disease of the central nervous system that can affect the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves.
- There is a range of complementary therapies that can work alongside a person's medical treatment by helping to ease symptoms.
- Effective therapies include chiropractic, acupuncture, massage, yoga, meditation and dietary modifications.
- Be advised by your doctor when considering any complementary treatment.

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MS Australia

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