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## Asthma and complementary therapies

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### Summary

- Although some people find complementary therapies helpful, there is not sufficient research available to determine if they can be effective in helping with asthma, in comparison to conventional (mainstream) medicine.
  - Do not stop taking your regular asthma preventer medication without discussing this first with your doctor.
  - If you think you are suffering from an allergy, keep a symptom diary to record the times and situations when your asthma is worse, to help identify triggers and to monitor the effects of any complementary therapies you may be trying.
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Complementary therapies are any medical or healthcare practices or products that are not part of 'standard' medical care (treatments offered by mainstream medicine). A complementary therapy can include treatments, medicine and different ideas and philosophies about why and how disease occurs and should be treated.

Some therapies have been well researched, but others require more investigation to discover if they can be effective in helping with asthma.

Some complementary therapies used by people with asthma include:

- acupuncture
- air purifiers or ionisers
- breathing exercises
- Buteyko
- herbal medicine
- homoeopathy
- massage
- nutritional supplements
- osteopathy, chiropractic and other manual therapies
- salt therapy
- traditional Chinese medicine
- yoga.

If you are considering trying a complementary therapy for help with managing your asthma, don't change or stop your asthma medicines without talking with your doctor.

### Caution regarding complementary therapies for asthma

Any treatment, conventional or complementary, has the potential to help as well as harm. Some complementary therapies that can cause asthma symptoms are echinacea, bee pollen, royal jelly, propolis, garlic and products containing aspirin.

If you would like to try a complementary therapy, talk to your doctor first about how you'd like to improve your asthma, and how you can measure whether the therapy is having any effect on your asthma control and symptoms.

Openly discussing your asthma treatment choices with your healthcare professional will help you to effectively manage your asthma.

Many therapies are designed to complement your existing medical treatment – not replace it. Be careful to maintain the use of your asthma medications to avoid asthma flare-ups and worsening asthma symptoms while you

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explore your preferred therapies.

### **Asthma and acupuncture**

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese treatment which involves inserting very fine acupuncture needles into the skin surface at different points on the body to influence the flow of energy ('qi' or 'chi').

Traditional acupuncturists believe that gentle stimulation at precise acupuncture points will aid the body's own defensive and self-healing systems, promoting and maintaining good health.

There has been much debate and research into the effects of acupuncture on many conditions, with varying outcomes. It is considered a safe treatment when it is performed by well-trained practitioners using sterile needles.

The evidence currently available does not show any beneficial effect of acupuncture on asthma.

### **Asthma and diet**

Many people with asthma think that if they avoid certain foods, such as dairy products, their asthma will improve due to reduced mucus production. This is called the 'milk myth'.

It is recommended that people with asthma:

- do not eliminate dairy from their diet unless they have a diagnosed food allergy to cow's milk
- do not try dietary elimination for themselves or their children, except under medical supervision of an allergist or accredited practising dietitian.

Caffeine consumption of at least three cups of coffee per day has been shown to be effective in helping some people with asthma, especially those who get exercise-induced asthma.

### **Asthma and herbal therapies**

Herbal medicine uses treatments made from plants and plant extracts. It is one of the oldest forms of medicine used around the world. There is some evidence that various herbs can improve asthma symptoms.

However, the benefits achieved from using herbal medicine are much less than those you can gain from the lowest dose of an inhaled corticosteroid preventer medication.

The main problems with herbal medicines are a lack of standardisation of the contents and dose, and the risk of side-effects. Some of the herbs shown to have a small benefit include:

- *Tylophora indica* (Indian ipecac)
- *Coleus forskohlii*
- some Chinese traditional medicines.

Always discuss the use of herbal therapies with your doctor before making a decision. That way, you can avoid side effects or possibly making your asthma worse. Herbal therapies are not recommended for use during pregnancy.

Echinacea, royal jelly, bee pollen, propolis and garlic can have serious side effects for people with asthma and other allergies. Royal jelly is known to have caused breathing difficulties, asthma attacks, severe allergic reactions and even death.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration advises that royal jelly is not suitable for children, and should not be taken by asthma and allergy sufferers.

### **Asthma and Buteyko breathing method**

The Buteyko breathing technique is a system of exercises that focuses on nose breathing, taking smaller, slower breaths, and avoiding deep breaths. It is based on the idea that people with asthma and other related conditions over-breathe and release too much carbon dioxide from the body.

Some studies have shown that for some people, the Buteyko breathing technique can reduce asthma symptoms and the use of reliever medication. The improvements shown take time, and require daily exercises over weeks or months. It is advisable to remain on your medication and speak to your doctor if you are thinking of trying

Buteyko.

Tai chi and qi gong have both been shown to be of some benefit to people with asthma. The strongest benefit these therapies offer for people with asthma is aerobic training – which helps with lung function, quality of life and an improvement in asthma symptoms.

Although breathing exercises may help reduce asthma symptoms overall for some people, they are not a substitute for reliever medication when you have worsening symptoms. Always carry your reliever medication with you, and use it when you need it.

### **Asthma and yoga**

Yoga is an ancient Indian practice using postures and movements, performed with breathing techniques, to help relaxation and can increase fitness. Many people say they find relaxation and physical (muscular) benefits from practising yoga.

Studies that look at asthma and the benefits of yoga indicate that yoga improves quality of life and asthma symptoms to some extent, and some studies show that yoga can reduce medication usage.

### **Asthma and chiropractic**

Chiropractic medicine is expert manipulation of the spine. Currently, there is not enough scientific evidence to show that manual therapies can improve asthma symptoms. More scientific studies are required to determine the potential benefits.

### **Asthma and hypnosis and meditation**

Hypnosis is a deep state of relaxation that allows the person 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 for your asthma or makes your asthma worse.

### **Asthma and homeopathy**

Homeopathy is based on the belief that a substance that would produce the symptoms of a disease in a healthy person can treat the disease itself if given in tiny amounts. The substance is believed to stimulate the immune system and cause it to cure the illness.

Homeopathy is a holistic approach, meaning that the whole of the body and spirit is considered, not just the disease.

There is no strong evidence showing that usual forms of homeopathy for asthma are effective. Until stronger evidence exists for the use of homeopathy in the treatment of asthma, we are unable to make recommendations about homeopathic treatment. Caution is important when consuming any substance that you may be allergic to.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- The **Royal Children's Hospital** has produced a number of videos to help you better understand and manage your child's asthma.
- **Asthma Australia (Victoria)** Tel. 1800 ASTHMA (278 462)
- **National Asthma Council Australia**
- **Medicines Line (Australia)** Tel. 1300 633 424
- **Therapeutic Goods Administration**, Tel. 1800 020 653
- **Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists** Tel. (07) 3149 3044

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