



Complementary and alternative treatments

- Most people have used, or will use, complementary and alternative treatments
- Find out what they are and how you can make informed decisions about them

Complementary and alternative treatments include a wide range of therapies, medicines, products or practices that aren't currently considered to be a conventional or mainstream medical treatment. They include acupuncture, supplements, meditation, massage, herbal treatments, aromatherapy and naturopathy.

The word complementary usually refers to treatments that are used alongside conventional medicine, whereas alternative usually means the treatment is used instead of conventional medicine.

For ease of use, we'll use the term complementary treatment when referring to all types of complementary or alternative treatments.

Complementary treatments and musculoskeletal conditions

Complementary treatments are widely used by people with arthritis, back pain and other musculoskeletal conditions to:

- manage symptoms such as pain and fatigue
- deal with anxiety and stress
- help them sleep
- feel in control of their own health.

Many people use complementary treatments because they believe they're safer, or more natural than conventional medicine. This isn't necessarily true.

As with any treatment, complementary treatments can cause harm and can make you unwell if not taken correctly, if they interact with one of your other medications, or if the practitioner you see isn't properly trained or qualified.

What's the evidence?

While many people feel that using complementary treatments has been beneficial for their health and wellbeing, there isn't as much evidence to support its use for musculoskeletal conditions as there is for conventional medicines.

For many complementary treatments there just aren't enough well-designed randomised controlled trials to show whether or not these therapies are effective. And if they are effective, for which conditions or symptoms.

That being said, some types of complementary treatments show promise and may be helpful for managing your condition. More and more research is now focusing on these treatments. But at the moment the evidence is still lacking so it's wise to proceed carefully and with caution.



Types of complementary treatments

There are a lot of complementary treatments available. We've provided information on some of the more commonly used types of complementary therapies here, but it's not an exhaustive list.

You can find out more about these and other treatments, as well as information about current research, side effects, and other things to consider in the [More to explore](#) section at the end.

Acupuncture - has been used for thousands of years and involves the insertion of fine needles in various locations on your body. They correspond to important points for treatment in Chinese medicine. Some acupuncturists will use laser in place of needles.

Alexander technique - involves learning to move, sit and stand in a way that minimises strain and pressure on your body.

Aromatherapy - is the use of aromatic essential oils to promote emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. The oils are diluted and used in a variety of ways including: inhalation, massage, in the bath.

Chiropractic - this treatment involves manipulation and manual adjustment of your spine. It's based on the premise that if your body, especially the spine, is out of alignment, it can affect the health and function of other parts of your body.

Copper bracelets - are worn by people to attempt to reduce pain and stiffness, however there's no evidence that they have any effect on your body at all.

Feldenkrais - uses gentle movements to relieve physical tension and stress, and develop increased flexibility, coordination and self-awareness.

Homeopathy - is a treatment based on the theory that 'like cures like', or that a disease or health issue can be cured by extremely small amounts of a substance that causes similar symptoms.

Magnets - are used in a variety of products including bracelets and mattresses, with the suggestion that they provide pain relief.

Massage - is a hands-on therapy that involves rubbing and manipulating the soft tissues of your body, especially your muscles. Massage can improve blood circulation, ease muscle tension and help you feel more relaxed. There are a variety of different types of massage available.

Meditation - is a practice that involves focusing your mind on a sound, your breathing or the present moment. It's used to help improve sleep, mood, relieve stress and reduce pain.

Naturopathy - is a treatment based on the theory that your body can heal itself using exercise, nutrition, vitamins, herbs and massage.

Osteopathy - is a hands-on treatment based on the premise that your body's wellbeing depends on your bones, muscles and other soft tissues functioning smoothly together. It uses physical manipulation, massage and stretching.

Reflexology - is a hands-on treatment where pressure is applied to specific points of your feet or hands. These points are believed to match up with other parts of your body. The idea is that this pressure or massage can treat health problems in that corresponding area.

Tai chi - is a low impact exercise that uses gentle movement, focused breathing and mental focus. It promotes correct body posture and balance and can be practiced by people of all ages and fitness levels.

Vitamins and herbal supplements - there are a wide variety of supplements that claim they can provide some benefit for a variety of musculoskeletal conditions. They include capsaicin cream, glucosamine, chondroitin, SAM-e, arnica, turmeric and ginger to name a few. Before adding a supplement to your medication regime, talk with your doctor about the potential harms and benefits and whether it's right for you. It's important to know that some supplements can interact with medications you may be taking, or may affect another health condition.

Yoga - involves physical postures, meditation, breathing and mental exercises that promote flexibility, relaxation and strength.

Before you start using any new complementary treatment, do your research, talk to your doctor about it, ask lots of questions and ensure you use a qualified practitioner or therapist.

Do your research

Some treatments may help you manage your symptoms (e.g. pain, stress), while others will have no effect. So it's important that you research the treatment thoroughly.

When doing your research, ask yourself:

- Do the benefits outweigh the risks?
- Has the treatment been shown to be effective in repeated scientific studies with large numbers of people?
- Did the research have a control group? A control group is a group of people who don't 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.
- Are potential risks, side effects and interactions with other treatments clearly identified?
- Can you continue to use your current effective treatments, as well as the complementary treatment?
- Is the treatment something you can afford and can access easily?

If you answered no to any of these questions, you should be wary of the treatment. Discuss it with your doctor or specialist before you go any further.

Finding a qualified practitioner

Contacting a professional association is a good starting point for finding a qualified practitioner or therapist (see our list below).

Your doctor and other health professionals (e.g. nurse, pharmacist), your family or friends may also be able to recommend someone.

Ask questions

When making enquiries of a potential practitioner, it's important that you ask lots of questions. For example:

- How does the treatment work?
- What are the possible side effects or risks?
- Have you treated other people with my condition or health issues?
- How long does it take to work?
- How will I know if it's working?
- How long will I need to take the treatment/use this therapy?
- What can I expect during a consultation/treatment session?
- How often will I need to see you?

- How much does it cost?
- What are your qualifications?
- Do you receive regular training and updates?
- Are you a member of the professional association for this treatment/practice?

You can also contact the professional association and check their list of members, and visit the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency website and search for the practitioner.

Other tips

- Be open and honest with your doctor about complementary treatments. Keep them informed about anything you're taking or considering taking (e.g. supplements, homeopathic treatments, herbal medicines) as well as any other therapies you're trying or considering trying (e.g. acupuncture, yoga).
- Before stopping a conventional medicine or treatment in favour of a complementary medicine or treatment, talk with your doctor and let them know what you're planning to do and why.
- Call Medicines Line on 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) for information about herbal medicine, vitamins and minerals, as well as prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
- Buy Australian. Australian complementary medicines are subject to strict safety and quality regulations. In Australia the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) ensures the safety of medicines and other therapeutic treatments.
- Once you've started a new complementary medicine or treatment, keep a diary so that you can see if it's working for you. Write down any changes in your symptoms for a month (remember to also include medication changes, changes in your exercise program, the amount of sleep you're getting and anything else that could affect your symptoms). After a month, you'll have a clearer picture of whether or not the treatment is working.

Be careful

As with any treatment, there may be side effects or risks. Any medicine, pill, tonic, tincture or supplement you drink or swallow has the potential to make you unwell. It may interact with other medications or supplements you're taking and change the way the medicine works - either making them less effective or by making them stronger.

If you have conditions such as osteoporosis or inflammatory arthritis, you should avoid manipulative treatments such as chiropractic and osteopathy.

Professional associations

- Association of Massage Therapists www.amt.org.au
- Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association www.acupuncture.org.au
- Australian Chiropractors Association <https://chiropractors.asn.au>
- Australian Feldenkrais Guild www.feldenkrais.org.au
- Australian Homoeopathic Association www.homeopathyoz.org
- Australian Natural Therapists Association www.australiannaturaltherapistsassociation.com.au
- Australian Naturopathic Practitioners Association <http://anpa.asn.au>
- Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique www.austat.org.au
- Australian Traditional-Medicine Society www.atms.com.au
- International Aromatherapy and Aromatic Medicine Association www.iaama.org.au
- Massage and Myotherapy Australia www.massagemyotherapy.com.au
- Meditation Association of Australia <http://meditationaustralia.org.au>
- Naturopaths and Herbalists Association of Australia www.nhaa.org.au
- Osteopathy Australia www.osteopathy.org.au
- Reflexology Association of Australia www.reflexology.org.au
- Tai Chi Australia www.taichiaustralia.com.au
- Yoga Australia www.yogaaustralia.org.au

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NPS MedicineWise
Medicines Line 1300 633 424
- Musculoskeletal Australia
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses.
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Arthritis Foundation (USA) www.arthritis.org
- Arthritis Research UK www.arthritisresearchuk.org
- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) www.ahpra.gov.au
- Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Cochrane Library www.cochranelibrary.com
- Healthdirect www.healthdirect.gov.au
- MedlinePlus (USA) <https://medlineplus.gov>
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (USA) <https://nccih.nih.gov>
- NHS Choices (UK) www.nhs.uk
- NPS MedicineWise www.nps.org.au
Medicines Line 1300 633 424 (1300 MEDICINE)
- Therapeutic Goods Administration www.tga.gov.au/complementary-medicines