

TAKING AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO GOOD HEALTH

Some people swear by complementary therapies. We investigate whether they are a safe and effective alternative to mainstream medicine

Complementary therapies are getting more popular – nearly six million of us use one each year. But they are often not accepted as part of mainstream medicine and their availability on the NHS is limited. As pressure mounts for such therapies to be integrated into conventional healthcare, we reveal your experiences of using them and explore some of the issues. Are they safe? Are they effective? Is tighter regulation needed?

DO THEY WORK?

The full range of complementary therapies is huge, and evidence for their effectiveness varies, due mainly to a lack of reliable scientific research. It can be hard to know whether a particular therapy works any better than a placebo (dummy treatment) or whether the illness would have improved in time without the therapy. Because of this and the fact that they are often used to improve general wellbeing, it can be difficult to assess their efficacy.

Broadly speaking, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) falls into three groups.

- Principal therapies have a diagnostic approach (they aim to identify and treat the cause of the problem), and they are the most widely available. The big five are chiropractic, osteopathy, acupuncture, herbal medicine and homeopathy.
- Complementary therapies are not diagnostic but are often used alongside conventional treatments. More regulation and research into their effectiveness are needed. They include aromatherapy, massage and reflexology.
- Other therapies claim to diagnose and treat illness but currently lack credible evidence. They include crystal therapy, iridology and kinesiology.

In this report we focus on the seven most popular therapies used by *Which?* readers in our recent survey. Five of these – osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, herbal medicine and homeopathy – are principal therapies, and two – aromatherapy and massage – are complementary. Many of our survey respondents felt that these therapies worked for them (see table, right).

IS TIGHTER REGULATION NEEDED?

Practitioners

Regulation of practitioners is very important, as some therapies can be dangerous if administered by unskilled hands. Currently only chiropractic and osteopathy are regulated by law, so all practitioners must meet high standards of training, safety and competency.

Herbal medicine and acupuncture are working towards statutory regulation, but the Department of Health (DoH) has yet to announce how and when this will be implemented. Michael McIntyre, Chairman of the European Herbal Practitioners Association, is worried that the current lack of legal safeguards could have dangerous consequences. He cites a man recently admitted to A&E in Glasgow with serious internal bleeding. A Chinese herbalist had given him herbs that reacted dangerously with his prescribed medicine. The herbalist had recently arrived from China, was unregistered and couldn't speak enough English to get full medical details.

Michael told us: 'It makes me sad that herbal medicine could be brought into disrepute by the actions of a few untrained or incompetent people.'

Perceived therapy effectiveness

Osteopathy (812)
Chiropractic (734)
Massage therapy (1,169)
Homeopathy (589)
Acupuncture (556)
Herbal medicine (915)
Aromatherapy (619)

Illness greatly improved (%)

69
69
50
45
42
35
30

This shows the percentage of complementary therapy users who said that, in their opinion, their problem had greatly improved as a result of using that therapy. The number in brackets is the sample size from our survey.

MASSAGE THERAPY

Massage therapy applies to the soft tissues of the skin, muscles, tendons

OUR SURVEY

In September 2005 we asked 5,927 *Which?* members about their experiences of using complementary therapies. They were chosen because they had previously told us they'd used at least one of our chosen seven therapies during the previous 12 months. We received 3,255 completed surveys – a 55 per cent response rate. Thanks to everyone who took part.

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OSTEOPATHY/CHIROPRACTIC

Osteopathy and chiropractic both involve manipulating and mobilising the spine. Osteopaths lay equal emphasis on the joints and surrounding soft tissue, such as muscles and ligaments, while chiropractors focus more on the joints of the spine and the nervous system.

ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture involves the insertion of fine needles (much finer than hypodermic needles) into specific 'acupuncture points' around the body to treat a wide range of illnesses.

AROMATHERAPY

Aromatherapy uses essential plant oils to relieve symptoms of ill health and to promote wellbeing. The oils are either inhaled or absorbed through the skin. They then enter the bloodstream and are broken down in the body in a similar way to drugs and herbs.

YOGA

Yoga uses pressure on the body – the joints and ligaments.

HERBAL MEDICINE

Herbal medicine uses the healing properties of plants to treat illness and has been around for thousands of years. There are various forms, such as Western, Chinese and Ayurvedic (India). Herbalists usually take a holistic approach, looking for underlying causes of ill health and focusing on the individual as a whole rather than on specific diseases they may have.

HOMEOPATHY

Homeopathy has been used for more than 150 years. Its basic principle is that 'like cures like'. Illnesses are treated with very dilute remedies made from natural materials such as plants, minerals, metals and some animal products, so someone with a runny nose and watery eyes might be given a remedy made from onions.

All other therapies in this report are working towards voluntary self-regulation to develop common standards of training and practice. For the last five years the Prince of Wales' Foundation for Integrated Health (FIH) has been working, with the DoH and professional CAM organisations, to set up a single regulatory body for each CAM and to help develop robust voluntary or statutory self-regulation. But at the moment, standards vary.

For this reason we advise you to choose a therapist who is a member of one of the organisations listed on p64, and make sure that you ask the questions listed on p15 before agreeing to any treatment.

Medicines

Until last year herbal medicines were unlicensed and consumers had no way of knowing which were safe. This allowed poor-quality, and sometimes unsafe, medicines to enter the UK. For example, the anti-anxiety herb kava kava was recently banned after being linked to liver damage. And

last November the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) found dangerously high levels of mercury in traditional Chinese medicines seized from a shop in London.

An EU directive, which came into effect last October, established a registration scheme for traditional herbal remedies that requires manufacturers to meet quality and safety standards.

The MHRA is responsible for the safety of all medicines in the UK. The Herbal Safety News pages on its website at www.mhra.gov.uk give advice on herbal products and ingredients.

AVAILABILITY

Unlike conventional medicine, CAM is not freely available to everyone. According to the latest figures, 90 per cent of people pay for CAM privately. The commonest CAM in our survey available on the NHS was acupuncture – 17 per cent of users were treated free – but free availability

Evidence for the effectiveness of complementary therapies varies

of other CAMs was much more limited (5 per cent of homeopathy users were treated free, but for other CAMs it was 2 per cent or less).

There's no nationwide policy on provision of CAM on the NHS. A DoH spokeswoman told us: 'It's up to individual clinicians and trusts to decide whether they think a CAM would be the best treatment for a patient.' If you are interested in CAM, it's worth asking your GP for information.

THE FUTURE

A study commissioned last October by Prince Charles urged the government to do more research into the role of CAM in the NHS. It claimed that it could fill gaps in NHS provision for anxiety, stress, depression and pain relief.

The FIH's report *A Healthy Partnership*, published at the same time, called for 'a more integrated health service...that does not ask the patient to choose between orthodox or complementary, but offers each patient the full advantages of both'.

But some health specialists are critical. Dr Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet* medical journal, has blasted the Prince's study as 'dangerous nonsense', saying that such enthusiasm for CAM undermines 'rational medicine'.

And even Professor Edzard Ernst, Director of Complementary Medicine at Exeter and Plymouth Universities, has expressed concern that the FIH is advocating integrated medicine based on 'anecdote and irrationality'. He says that anything other than 'evidence-based' medicine could be bad for public health and CAM itself.

Michael Summers, chairman of The Patients' Association, told us: 'We would welcome everyone being given access to therapies that have been proven to work for certain medical conditions.'

The debate continues. In the meantime, below we provide a round-up of the best available scientific research on the seven most popular therapies from our survey of nearly 6,000 *Which?* members.

OUR EXPERT

Our expert, Helen Barnett, is a member of *Which?*'s *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin* team. She has an MSc in Complementary Therapy Studies and is the author of *The Which? Guide to Complementary Therapies*. She assessed the efficacy and safety of all therapies based on a review of the best published research and scientific trials available.

Osteopathy and chiropractic



Practitioners identify points of weakness or excessive strain in the body and then use various hands-on techniques to stretch, mobilise and manipulate the muscles and joints.

REGULATION

Osteopaths must be registered with the General Osteopathic Council, and chiropractors with the

General Chiropractic Council. It is an offence to call yourself an osteopath or a chiropractor if you aren't.

SAFETY

You shouldn't have forceful manipulation if you're pregnant or have certain medical conditions, such as osteoporosis and arthritis. You should also avoid it if you are taking drugs to stop your blood clotting.

A review of scientific research has found that short-lasting side effects, such as mild pain, headaches and tiredness, occur in about half of patients who have spinal

manipulation. But no serious, permanent complications were reported in the trials.

EXPERT VERDICT

There's controversy about how effective spinal manipulation is for pain in the neck and lower back.

One review concluded there was no evidence that spinal manipulation was better than other standard treatments for acute or chronic low-back pain. Other reviews have found that spinal manipulation is slightly better for short-term, non-specific pain in the lower back than no treatment, placebo therapy or massage therapy, and that it has a similar effect to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for chronic pain in the lower back.

It's unclear, though, how effective manipulation is for neck pain because the results of trials vary. A review of spinal

CHIROPRACTIC

70% definitely recommend it to a friend

Average cost £30 a session



manipulation for headaches suggested that it could be helpful, but more high-quality studies are needed.

READERS' VERDICT

More than two thirds of osteopathy users in our survey had seen an osteopath for back or neck pain, and 69 per cent said that their specific condition had improved.

Some felt that an osteopath provided treatment that wasn't available from a GP. Kevin Sanderson from Runcorn said: 'Osteopathy helped to ease and remove my back pain when my GP simply recommended rest and pain killers.'

As well as being treated for specific pain, some users had 'a regular MOT to correct any imbalances'.

Some people felt that regular sessions were beneficial but had had to stop because of the cost of treatment.

Most users of chiropractic had used it to treat back or neck pain, and their satisfaction was high.

One reader said: 'I think it is a wonderful complementary therapy and I would not go to anyone else (including my GP) for back or joint pain.'

Another reader said his chiropractic treatment had 'totally outclassed what was available via the NHS'.

OSTEOPATHY

76% definitely recommend it to a friend

Average cost £30 a session



Acupuncture



Acupuncture has been practised in China and other Eastern countries for thousands of years, where it is a key part of traditional Chinese medicine. It has become increasingly popular in the UK since the 1960s.

REGULATION

The acupuncture profession is working towards statutory regulation. There are several voluntary

regulatory bodies that can provide you with lists of qualified acupuncturists (see 'Contacts', p64, for more details).

SAFETY

Practised by a qualified and competent practitioner, acupuncture is safe for everyone, including babies, pregnant women and elderly people. A few points need to be avoided during pregnancy.

Potentially serious risks, such as an infection, punctured lung, or spinal cord injury, happen in fewer than one in 10,000 treatments and are mainly due to poorly-trained practitioners or bad practice – for

example, using dirty needles or inserting them wrongly.

Mild, short-lasting side effects include slight bleeding or superficial bruising, pain at the needle site during treatment, and temporary worsening of existing symptoms following treatment.

Some people might occasionally feel faint or drowsy as a result of treatment.

EXPERT VERDICT

Hundreds of trials have assessed acupuncture's effectiveness. These show that it is useful for dental and chronic pain in the lower back, nausea and vomiting after operations, chronic headache and migraine, osteoarthritis,

and both pelvic and low-back pain in pregnancy.

But acupuncture probably doesn't help you to stop smoking or lose weight.

READERS' VERDICT

Most users in our survey were on a short course of acupuncture treatment for a specific problem – mainly back and neck pain followed by

joint/muscle pain, sports injuries and osteoarthritis. It was also being used to treat allergies, stress, depression and fatigue.

Compared with other therapies, it is quite common for GPs to refer people to an acupuncturist, and 17 per cent of our readers were having acupuncture free on the NHS – more than for any other therapy we asked about.

54% definitely recommend it to a friend

Average cost £30 a session



Herbal medicine



It's possible to treat minor ailments yourself by buying over-the-counter herbal remedies, or you can ask a herbalist to make a remedy specially for you.

REGULATION

The herbal medicine profession is working towards statutory regulation. The European Herbal Practitioners Association is an umbrella body representing all the UK's main herbal medicine bodies.

SAFETY

Herbal medicines should be treated with care, as some can have side effects or interact with other medicines. For example, St John's wort interacts with several drugs such as antidepressants, the anticoagulant drug warfarin and oral contraceptives.

Always tell your GP, pharmacist and herbalist about any other medicines you are taking.

EXPERT VERDICT

Herbs and herbal extracts contain active substances that can have wide-ranging effects on the body.

There is good clinical evidence, for example, that saw palmetto is as effective as conventional drugs for a swollen prostate gland, while ginkgo biloba can delay decline in Alzheimer's disease

to the same degree as drugs such as Aricept.

There is also encouraging but unconfirmed evidence that, for example, St John's wort is as effective as Prozac for treating mild to moderate depression, and that cranberry might prevent cystitis.

READERS' VERDICT

Most users of herbal medicine were treating a specific problem, from coughs and skin problems to irritable bowel syndrome and muscle pain.

A huge 73 per cent of those using herbal medicine had not seen a herbal practitioner. A good practitioner should take a detailed case history and ensure you're not taking other medicines that could interact with the herbal remedies. But that doesn't always happen. Bill Gregory from West Kilbride was prescribed Chinese herbs that could have interacted with his warfarin and caused 'uncontrollable' bleeding. Luckily, he didn't take them.

44% definitely recommend it to a friend

Average cost £25 a session (plus remedies)



Aromatherapy



Often combined with massage, aromatherapy uses different blends of essential oils, depending on patients' diet, lifestyle and health problems.

REGULATION

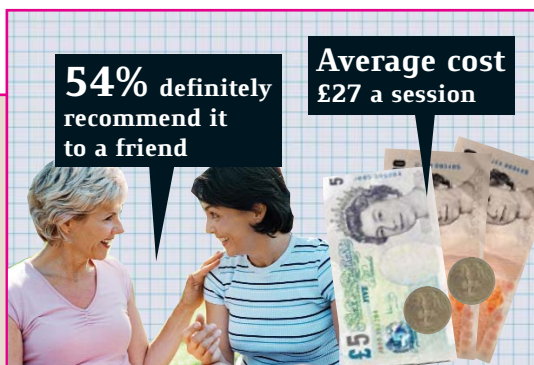
The Aromatherapy Consortium is setting up a single register for aromatherapists, with a view to creating a voluntary self-regulation system by the end of 2006.

SAFETY

Essential oils should never be swallowed or used internally, unless prescribed by a qualified herbal practitioner.

There are few risks when aromatherapy is practised by a properly-trained therapist. But side effects can include headaches, nausea and allergic reactions. Some essential oils, such as citrus, can cause your skin to become sensitive to sunlight, and others can aggravate skin conditions. Many oils are not advised if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Some oils are thought to reduce or enhance the effects of certain conventional



medicines, such as antibiotics, sedatives or antihistamines.

EXPERT VERDICT

Most of the evidence for aromatherapy is anecdotal. Scientific trials haven't produced any conclusive results, but there is promising evidence suggesting that aromatherapy might reduce anxiety for a short time, reduce agitation in people with dementia and cancer, as well as making them feel better psychologically, help a

kind of baldness called alopecia areata and help prevent bronchitis.

There is also evidence to suggest that tea tree oil might help relieve acne and fungal infections.

READERS' VERDICT

More than half of users were self-medicating, without seeing an aromatherapist. Three quarters used the therapy for their general wellbeing and only a quarter were using it to treat a

specific problem – most commonly back and neck pain, stress and coughs and colds.

But satisfaction wasn't high. Only three in ten people felt that aromatherapy had greatly improved their specific condition – lower satisfaction than for other therapies. But almost all the users enjoyed actually having the therapy.

Many users felt that aromatherapy helps relaxation and combats stress. Eileen Richardson of Wimbourne in Dorset told us: 'Excessive stress results in illness, therefore regular use of essential oils and regular periods of relaxation are essential in this hectic world.'

Homeopathy



Homeopathic prescriptions are usually tailored to each patient, so two people with the same symptoms may be given different remedies. As with herbal medicine, people might self-medicate for minor ailments or go to see a therapist to get more detailed advice or for serious ailments.

REGULATION

There are many different professional organisations working towards voluntary

self-regulation. These organisations are all members of the Council of Organisations Registering Homeopaths.

SAFETY

Homeopathy is considered to be extremely safe, probably because the active ingredients of homeopathic remedies are present in extremely low concentrations. For about 20 per cent of people, their symptoms get worse for a short time before getting better after taking a remedy. This is known as a 'healing' reaction and is usually mild and short-lived.

EXPERT VERDICT

There is a growing number of trials comparing the effectiveness of homeopathic treatments with placebos. But reviews of these trials give conflicting opinions. Some

reviews have claimed that the trials show homeopathy to be more effective than placebo, while others have concluded that they show it to be no more effective.

Overall, there's no reliable evidence to say which disorders are best treated with homeopathy, nor which homeopathic remedies can definitely help specific conditions.

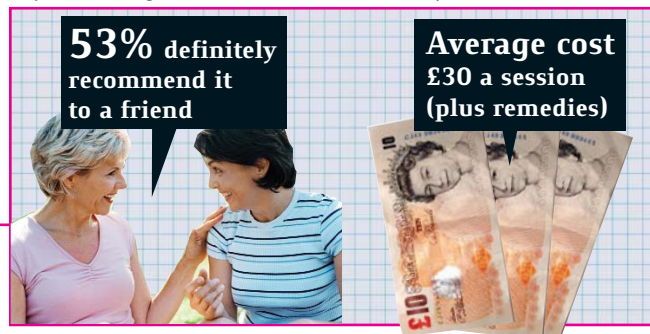
READERS' VERDICT

Our survey showed that readers used homeopathy to treat a wide range of health problems: for example, hayfever, coughs and colds,

stress, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, fatigue and skin problems.

Opinion on the results was divided. Just over half of respondents said they would recommend the treatment to a friend; but fewer (45 per cent) felt their problem had greatly improved as a result.

Despite the lack of reliable evidence, individual users of homeopathic remedies can be extremely enthusiastic. Margaret Gallagher from Cardigan told us: 'My whole mental, physical and emotional state has improved since I have been seeing my homeopath.'



Massage therapy



Massage therapy is most often used to relax patients physically and mentally but may also be used for certain medical conditions.

REGULATION

The profession is working towards voluntary self-regulation. The two main bodies are the General Council for Massage Therapy and the General Shiatsu Council.

SAFETY

Massage is safe when practised by a properly-qualified therapist. But you should always seek the advice of your GP

before having a massage if you're pregnant or have varicose veins, deep-vein thrombosis, broken bones, swelling, bruising, cuts or infections, severe back problems, arthritis, cancer, HIV/ AIDS or epilepsy.

The pressure from some techniques can cause temporary discomfort but if you feel persistent pain, stop the treatment immediately. Some people experience aches and pains for a day or two after a massage.

EXPERT VERDICT

There is good scientific evidence that massage therapy works for certain conditions. A single massage can reduce anxiety, lower your blood pressure and slow your heart, and several treatments can reduce pain.

Scientific reviews have found that massage can benefit

premature and small babies, and may also help to relieve cancer symptoms, pain in the lower back and chronic constipation.

Massage may help relieve neck, shoulder and post-operative pain, pain and anxiety in stroke patients and women in labour, and anxiety and depression in pregnant women and those with breast cancer. However, this needs further research.

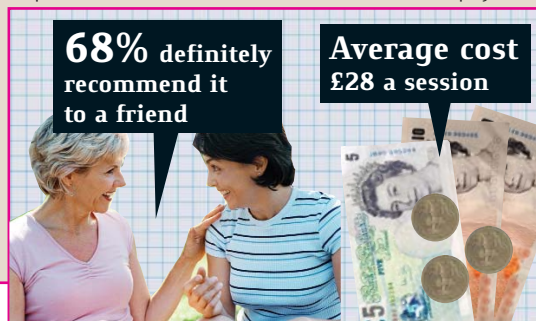
READERS' VERDICT

'Frankly, if there's no massage therapy in heaven, I'm not going,' said Carole Hamilton from London. Another reader told us: 'It's one of the most relaxing experiences. It relieves

me of headaches caused by tightened neck muscles and it helps me relax and sleep better.'

Fifty three per cent of users in our survey were having massage simply for their general wellbeing. The commonest specific conditions were back or neck pain, other joint or muscle pain and sports injuries. Half felt massage greatly improved their condition and 39 per cent had seen a slight improvement.

Jane Winfield of Westcliff-on-Sea summed up the thoughts of many: 'It's a shame that massage isn't available on the NHS for those who cannot afford to pay.'



How to choose a therapist

Choose a therapist who is a member of a reputable professional organisation – see p64 for a list. The organisation should also be able to give you more information and advice. It's worth asking your GP, too.

Check the following:

- whether the therapist is registered with the relevant statutory body or a professional association
- whether they are sufficiently qualified and experienced
- that they have professional indemnity insurance. This

covers both you and the therapist if something goes wrong and you need to claim for damages

- how much the treatment will cost per session and how many sessions you may need.

A good practitioner won't mind answering any of your questions and should always take a detailed medical history before starting treatment.

Keep everyone informed. Always tell your GP, complementary practitioner and pharmacist about any other medicines you are

taking (almost half the people in our survey who were using a complementary therapy for a specific problem said that their GP was not aware that they were doing so).

IF THINGS GO WRONG

If you are unhappy with your practitioner, or the service you have received, complain to the practitioner to give them a chance to put things right.

If you're unhappy with their response, complain to the professional body of which they are a member.

which? says

Some complementary therapies can alleviate the symptoms of certain conditions, but there is limited evidence that they can actually cure you.

As new research becomes available, we would welcome increased flexibility in the NHS so that the most appropriate effective treatment, whether conventional or complementary, is chosen for each patient.

No one advises that you should use CAM as a complete substitute for conventional diagnosis and treatment, but if you find CAM beneficial and decide to use it, you have the right to be treated by qualified and safe practitioners. At the moment, however, choosing a reputable practitioner can be difficult, and the current system of regulation is confusing.

We believe that everyone should have access to good, reliable information about complementary therapies and we welcome plans to create a single umbrella organisation for each therapy to provide good-quality and accurate information. We would also like to see statutory regulation for all professions that pose a potential risk to consumers' health.

Which? continues to lobby for improved regulation of all health professions, whether mainstream or alternative.