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Complementary Therapies and Multiple System Atrophy

The MSA Trust Nurse Specialists are often asked if complementary therapies would be beneficial in multiple system atrophy (MSA). As there is little evidence-based research to show how effective they are, we have produced this factsheet to give you a general overview of some of the types of therapies that are available. We hope this will assist you in deciding what might be right for you.

What are complementary therapies?

A complementary therapy can be described as a treatment that uses a holistic approach, aiming to treat the whole person, including mind, body and spirit, rather than treating symptoms alone.

Complementary therapies can be used alongside conventional medicine (this being the treatment of symptoms and diseases using drugs, radiotherapy or surgery). They can be used for symptom management and to enhance a sense of physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Complementary therapies are promoted not as cures, but as a means to enhance a person's quality of life. Sometimes they may be used to relieve symptoms or the side effects of conventional medical treatments. Complementary therapies are in no way meant as an alternative to the prescribed medications or treatments that your Doctor recommends.

N.B. It is important to note that there exists another area of treatment called Alternative Therapies, and that such treatments are not equivalent to, nor related to, Complementary Therapies. Alternative Therapies are based on historical or cultural traditions. None have been proven to cure MSA or slow its progression and some may be harmful. Therefore, we do **NOT** advocate the use of Alternative Therapies. They do not work as a replacement to any prescribed medication you may be taking. Most importantly you should not stop any prescribed medication without discussing this with your specialist first.

How might complementary therapies benefit me?

Benefits you may experience include:

- Easing muscle tension or rigidity
- Feeling more relaxed with better emotional balance
- Improved circulation (may lower blood pressure so inform your therapist if you have low blood pressure)
- Pain relief

- Helping with anxiety or low mood
- Improved sleep.

Are complementary therapies effective and are they safe?

Some complementary therapies are based on principles and an evidence base that is not recognised by the majority of independent scientists.

However, some complementary therapies have been tested in the same way as conventional medical treatments. This is to see how effective and safe they are and to see if they have side effects. In a few cases, certain complementary treatments have been proven to work for a limited number of health conditions. For example, there is good evidence that osteopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture are effective at treating persistent low back pain.

Whilst there may be no hard scientific evidence to prove that many of these therapies work, some people do find them to be beneficial. As MSA is so individual our MSA Nurse Specialists are very happy to discuss the options with you.

The Department of Health and Social Care in England recommends that you should consult a therapist registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council, where appropriate.

To find out more information and to see the full list of therapies regulated by the Council, visit their website www.cnhc.org.uk and see our Useful Contacts section at the end of this factsheet.

How do I choose a complementary therapy?

When choosing a complementary therapy, you may wish to consider:

- how you might expect to benefit from it
- whether there are any safety issues (some therapies should not be used alongside certain prescribed medicines - you can check with your local pharmacist about this)
- how much it will cost.

Some therapies aim to relax you or to improve your sense of wellbeing whilst others may help you cope with symptoms such as muscle rigidity, emotional fluctuation, or poor sleep.

Types of complementary therapies

As there are numerous complementary therapies we are unable to cover them all in this leaflet, but have included the most common ones. To try to make this easier to understand we have divided them into:

- Active movement therapies e.g. Alexander Technique, Conductive Education, Pilates, Tai chi.
- Passive hands on therapies e.g. aromatherapy, massage, chiropractic.
- Invasive therapies e.g. acupuncture, homeopathy and herbal remedies.
- Activity based e.g. art therapy, music therapy.

Active movement therapies

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is a way of learning how you can get rid of harmful tension in your body. It is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support and coordination.

This technique teaches the use of the optimum amount of effort for a particular activity, giving you more energy for all your other activities. It is not a series of treatments or exercises, but rather a re-education of the mind and body.

Pilates

Pilates is an exercise system that focuses on stretching and strengthening the whole body to improve balance, muscle-strength, flexibility and posture. It incorporates elements of yoga, martial arts and Western forms of exercise.

Tai Chi

Tai chi, which originated in China as a martial art, is sometimes referred to as “moving meditation” - practitioners move their bodies slowly, gently and with awareness, while breathing deeply. Tai chi incorporates the Chinese concepts of yin and yang (opposing forces within the body) and qi (a vital energy or life force). Practicing Tai chi is said to support a healthy balance of yin and yang, thereby aiding the flow of qi.

Passive hands-on therapies

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy, also referred to as Essential Oil therapy, can be defined as the art and science of utilising naturally extracted aromatic essences from plants to balance, harmonise and promote the health of body, mind and spirit. It is commonly used in massage but can be used in other ways, such as diffusing oils for inhalation.

Some oils should not be used with certain medications or conditions so do ensure you advise the therapist of the medication you are taking and any health conditions you have.

Massage

Massage can be applied with the hands, fingers, elbows, knees, forearm, feet, or a massage device. It can promote relaxation and well-being, improve circulation and alleviate pain. If you have a full body massage it can affect your blood pressure, so it may be advisable to have a foot or hand massage, or neck and shoulder massage only. Indian Head Massage, which focuses on the upper body, is also an option.

Chiropractic

Chiropractic is a form of complementary therapy in which a therapist diagnoses, seeks and prevents any problems of the musculoskeletal system which may be affecting the wider nervous system and therefore the health of the whole body. The therapist uses their hands to treat the joints and muscles through spinal manipulation.

Reflexology

Reflexology is a complementary therapy that is based on the theory that different points and areas on the feet, hands and face correspond with different areas of the body. Reflexology is an ancient therapy which has been practised for over 5000 years and reflexologists believe that working these points or areas can help aid relaxation, improve mood, release tension, enhance sleep and can generally help improve wellbeing. Gentle pressure, from special thumb and finger techniques, and massage are used during the treatment which is tailored to the whole person, taking into account both physical and non-physical factors that might be affecting wellbeing. *Information provided by the Association of Reflexologists.*

Reiki

Reiki is said to help release physical, emotional and mental blockages by using "life energy". This energy is used to help the body balance and heal itself. It involves the therapist putting their hands in different positions either on or above the body over the seven "chakra" points. Healing energy is then said to flow, allowing the life energy to flow again.

Invasive therapies

Before commencing any invasive therapies, ensure the therapist is aware of all the medication you are taking and all your health conditions.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a form of complementary medicine in which a therapist inserts fine needles into specific areas of the body to help with a variety of ailments. Acupuncture works on the body's motivating energy, known as qi, to help it to move smoothly through the pathways in our body. The needles go into these channels under the skin and help the body to restore its balance. When the flow of qi is not smooth, acupuncturists believe it can result in ill health, so acupuncture aims to redress the balance of the qi to help the body to balance itself again.

Homeopathy

A central principle of homeopathy is that "like cures like" – based on the premise that a substance that causes certain symptoms can also help to remove those symptoms. A second central principle is based around a process of dilution. Practitioners believe that the more a substance is diluted in this way, the greater its power to treat symptoms. There is no proven evidence and much debate about the effectiveness of this therapy.

Herbal therapies

Therapies using herbs and plants can be available as a tea or taken as a tablet, cream or ointment. Some common therapies that use herb and plant extracts include:

- Aromatherapy - using natural oils extracted from plants.
- Flower remedies - using the essence of flowers.
- Homeopathy - using plant and mineral extracts diluted many times.
- Herbal medicines – using plants or mixtures of plant extracts.

It is important to speak to your GP, Neurologist or Parkinson's Nurse Specialist before taking any herbal medicines or supplements, even if purchased at a local chemist or health store. This is because some of them may have serious side effects or may interfere with your usual medication. For example, the herbal remedy St John's Wort, which can be used for depression, is not recommended for people with certain health problems.

Activity based therapies

Art therapy

Art allows people to openly express their feelings, reducing anxiety and a sense of isolation. It focuses attention, provides pleasure, nurtures social behaviours and a sense of self-esteem. Many hospices now offer art therapy.

Conductive education

Conductive Education originated in Hungary in the late 1940's as a unique form of education and rehabilitation for people with neurological movement disorders.

It is based on a belief of human potential where people with neurological motor disorders have the capacity to learn and develop skills through structured teaching and learning programmes. These are designed and delivered by trained conductors.

Music therapy

Music can help to reduce anxiety and depression. It connects both mind and body. Music encourages us to move our bodies which can improve balance and gait. In particular Dance to Music can improve rigidity, hand movements and facial expression for people living with Parkinson's and there is currently much interest in this subject.

Creative writing therapy

Creative writing can be used as a therapeutic tool in palliative care and some hospices are now offering this type of therapy. It can enhance well-being and self-awareness. It can be used as a form of stress management and source of enjoyment; to enhance quality of life and to encourage self-esteem.

Accessing complementary therapies

The availability of complementary treatments on the NHS is limited. Some, such as acupuncture, may be offered by the NHS.

Always tell your doctor if you are thinking about using complementary therapies. Although many complementary therapies are safe to use alongside conventional treatment, some may not be suitable. Ask your doctor or nurse if there are complementary therapies at your hospital and whether they can refer you for free treatment.

Therapies that aren't provided by the NHS can be expensive. The organisations at the end of this information factsheet should be able to give you an idea of the usual costs of certain complementary therapies.

Many day hospices offer complementary therapies for someone living with MSA and sometimes these are also available for their partner.

Palliative care

Palliative care is treatment that is aimed not at curing illness but rather alleviating the symptoms of illness and enabling the person affected to live the best possible life they can.

Complementary therapists work holistically acknowledging all of their patient's needs – physical, mental, emotional, social and cultural. Complementary therapies are often used in palliative care for the beneficial effects on the body, mind and spirit - both aiming to control pain and other symptoms and to optimise quality of life for people with MSA and their families.

In palliative care, the people caring for a person, such as friends and family, may also have heightened health issues, particularly stress and fatigue. Therapists will often work with these carers too. They may use therapies such as acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, hypnotherapy, Reiki, sound therapy and Tai Chi.

In order to access a complementary therapy service at your local hospice or palliative care unit you usually have to be under their care. Ask your GP or specialist nurse to refer you to your local hospice or palliative care unit.

Useful contacts

For more information and to find a registered practitioner please refer to the following list:

The Association of Reflexologists
01823 351010 info@aor.org.uk

National Institute of Medical Herbalists
01392 426 022 www.nimh.org.uk

Alliance of Registered Homeopaths
01825 714 506 www.a-r-h.org

British Homeopathic Association
01582 408 675 www.britishhomeopathic.org

International Register of Consultant Herbalists and Homeopaths
01594 368 443 www.irch.org

General Council for Massage Therapies
0870 850 445 www.gcmt.org.uk

British Association for Music Therapy
020 7837 6100 www.bamt.org

General Osteopathic Council
020 7357 6655 www.osteopathy.org.uk

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council
020 3178 2199 www.cnhc.org.uk

British Reflexology Association
01886 821207 www.britreflex.co.uk

Tai Chi Union for Great Britain
07774 985411 www.taichiunion.com

British Acupuncture Council
020 8735 0400 www.acupuncture.org.uk

Therapy Directory www.therapy-directory.org.uk
Alexander Technique International
01727 760 067 www.ati-net.com

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council
020 3178 2199 www.cnhc.org.uk

The International Federation of Professional Aromatherapists
01455 637 987 www.ifparoma.org

The Trust's contact details

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References for this information sheet are available by contacting support@msatrust.org.uk

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