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Complementary Therapies and Multiple System Atrophy

The MSA Trust Health Care Specialists are often asked if complementary therapies would be beneficial in multiple system atrophy. 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. Please speak to a qualified medical or healthcare professional before taking any actions.

What are complementary therapies?

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

Complementary therapies can be used alongside conventional medicine, which is 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 wellbeing. 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.

PLEASE NOTE: It is important to note that there exists another area of treatment called Alternative Therapies. These 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. There is no evidence that they 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.

Possible benefits of complementary therapies

Benefits people have reported include:

- Easing muscle tension or rigidity
- Feeling more relaxed with better emotional balance



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- Improved circulation (some therapies 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 certain types of chronic 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 Health Care Professionals 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 to 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 resource. We have included the most common ones. 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.



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Active movement therapies

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is a way of learning how you can get rid of 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 tell the therapist what medication you are taking and any health conditions you have, including low blood pressure if this is the case. Some people may have an allergic reaction to certain essential oils. Again, it's important to tell the therapist about any allergies or suspected allergies you have.

Massage

Massage can be applied with the hands, fingers, elbows, forearm, feet, hot stones or bamboo sticks, 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 and can be helpful for headaches, neck or shoulder pain. Massage may not be suitable for people with certain medical conditions, a history of blood clots, or weak or broken bones, so always get advice from a medical professional first.

Chiropractic

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

Reflexology

Reflexology is a complementary therapy 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.



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Reflexologists believe that working these points or areas can help aid relaxation, improve mood, release tension, enhance sleep and 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 is said to work on the body's motivating energy, known as qi, to help it to move smoothly through pathways in the body. The needles go into these pathways 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. 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 may 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 **vital** 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 can 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, can interact with many different medications and cause serious side-effects.

Activity based therapies

Meditation

Meditation is a practice that involves training the mind to focus and develop greater awareness. It typically includes sitting quietly, paying attention to the breath, and gently redirecting focus when the mind wanders. Regular meditation can help reduce stress, enhance concentration, and promote emotional balance, calmness, and improved sleep.



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Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that involves intentionally paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It includes noticing current thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, and accepting them as they are. Mindfulness has been shown to reduce psychological distress by helping individuals manage emotions and behaviour more effectively. By encouraging awareness and acceptance of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, mindfulness supports healthier coping and reduces impulsive reactions, overthinking, and avoidance.

Common mindfulness techniques include deep breathing, body scans, mindful walking, and mindful eating—each designed to help bring focus to the present moment in a calm and attentive way.

Art therapy

Art allows people to openly express their feelings, reducing feelings of anxiety and isolation. It focuses attention, provides pleasure, and 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 therapy has shown to improve rigidity, hand movements and facial expression for people living with Parkinson's and there is currently much interest in this subject. There is a wealth of Youtube videos available on this subject.

Sound therapy

Sound therapy, sometimes known as sound bathing, uses specific tones, frequencies, and vibrations to promote relaxation. Unlike music therapy, which can include activities like singing or songwriting, sound therapy does not use lyrics, although it may involve chanting or simple vocal tones. Instruments such as singing bowls may be used to create immersive sounds. Sound bathing is a traditional spiritual practice, used in meditation, that has been adopted into Western culture. As yet there is no clinical research to support beneficial claims made for sound therapy.

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 wellbeing and self-awareness. Creative writing 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.



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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 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., They aim to control pain and other symptoms and to optimise quality of life for people with MSA and their families.

In palliative care, those caring for a person with MSA, such as friends and family, may also have heightened health issues, particularly stress and fatigue. Therapists will often work with these carers too.

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.



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Useful contacts

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

The Association of Reflexologists: 01823 351 010
www.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

Homeopathy UK: 0203 640 5903
www.homeopathy-uk.org/

International Register of Consultant Herbalists and Homeopaths:
www.irch.org

General Council for Manual Therapies: 0333 772 2393
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

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council: 020 3327 2720
www.cnhc.org.uk

British Reflexology Association: 0333 772 9217
www.britreflex.co.uk

Tai Chi Union for Great Britain: 07387 181 826
www.taichiunion.com

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

Therapy Directory: 0333 325 2505
www.therapy-directory.org.uk

Alexander Technique International
www.alexandertechniqueinternational.org/

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

<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-meditate-for-beginners/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>

<https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>



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The Trust's contact details

We have MSA Health Care Specialists that support people affected by MSA in the UK and Ireland. If you would like to find the MSA Health Care Specialist for your area, contact us on the details below or use the interactive map here – <https://www.msatrust.org.uk/support-for-you/hcps/>.

T: 0333 323 4591



E: support@msatrust.org.uk |

W: www.msatrust.org.uk



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

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