

Therapies using herbs, plant extracts, food or supplements

This information is an extract from the booklet *Cancer and complementary therapies*. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a copy free – see page 8.

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These therapies use substances such as herbs, plants, foods, vitamins and other natural substances. They are widely available in supermarkets, chemists, health food shops, on the internet and from nutritionists, herbalists and homeopaths. They are mainly taken orally but can also come as oils and creams.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is the use of natural oils extracted from plants. The oils are thought to have therapeutic properties. They may be used during massage but can also be used in baths and through diffusers.

It's not always necessary to remove clothing to have massage or aromatherapy. Often, hand and forearm massage or head and neck massage can be very relaxing.

'[Aromatherapy] certainly helps – it makes you feel better in yourself.'

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Different oils have different effects. For example, an aromatherapist may use cedarwood for a pleasant and relaxing effect, or rosemary for an invigorating and refreshing effect.

It's important to tell the therapist about any medicines you take and give them all your medical details.

Some oils have physical effects on the body, such as raising blood pressure. And some can have oestrogen-like effects and are best avoided by people with oestrogen-dependent cancers (such as some breast cancers). If you're having conventional therapy for cancer, such as chemotherapy or hormonal therapy, you should always check with your doctor before beginning aromatherapy treatment.

If you're having radiotherapy, it's usually fine to have aromatherapy and massage, as long as it's not used on the area being treated with radiotherapy.

For more detailed information about aromatherapy and to find a trained therapist, visit the Aromatherapy Council website at aromatherapycouncil.org.uk

Flower remedies

Flower remedies are considered to be safe and may help reduce anxiety and some symptoms for some people. They are based on the essences of flowers, diluted many times and drunk as a liquid.

Different types of flower remedies, including Bach flower remedies and Jan de Vries flower remedies, are available. They can be bought from health food shops and some chemists.

Flower remedies are often diluted in alcohol, so people who don't drink alcohol may choose not to use them.

You can get more information about Bach remedies from The Doctor Edward Bach Centre. Contact them on **01491 834 678** or visit their website at bachcentre.com

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is used for a number of illnesses and may be taken in addition to conventional treatment to try to improve the quality of life of people with cancer. There's no reliable scientific evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy, however many people who use it say they are satisfied or very satisfied with it.

'I go to the homeopathic hospital and I've found that they have been very helpful.'

Homeopathy is based on the theory that a substance that causes similar symptoms to those of the illness being treated can be used in tiny amounts to treat those symptoms. Homeopathic remedies, which come as tablets, liquids or creams, contain these substances in an extremely diluted form.

Homeopaths may use homeopathic preparations to try to relieve symptoms caused by cancer or side effects caused by cancer treatments.

Some GPs and hospital doctors are trained in homeopathy, and homeopathy is sometimes available through the NHS. If you're interested in this type of treatment, you can discuss it with your GP or your cancer specialist.

Homeopathic preparations are extremely diluted, so homeopathy is safe to use alongside conventional cancer treatments and there's no evidence that it causes side effects.

Some homeopathic remedies are diluted in alcohol, so people who don't drink alcohol may choose not to use these.

You can get information about homeopathy and finding a registered practitioner from the British Homeopathic Association. Contact them on **01582 408 675** or visit their website at **britishhomeopathic.org**

Mistletoe (Iscador[®], Eurixor[®])

Mistletoe can be taken by mouth or as injections. It may be administered by homeopaths and is sometimes described as a herbal treatment or as a homeopathic remedy. But, strictly speaking, it's an anthroposophical treatment.

Anthroposophical medicine aims to integrate conventional medicine with complementary treatments, including homeopathy, physical and artistic therapies.

It's claimed that mistletoe may have various effects, including stimulating the immune system, improving the quality of life of people with cancer and reducing side effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

However, at the moment there's no reliable scientific evidence that mistletoe is effective in treating cancer. In general, however, treatment with mistletoe appears to be safe and any side effects are usually mild.

If mistletoe is taken in large doses it may cause more serious side effects.

When given as an injection, mistletoe may cause mild swelling, redness, itching and pain around the injection site. It can occasionally cause allergic reactions, which may be serious in some people.

Because mistletoe extracts may stimulate the immune system, they could reduce the effectiveness of some medicines, such as steroids and cyclosporine, used after bone marrow or stem cell transplants.

Mistletoe extracts can also increase the effects of blood pressure medicines and some anaesthetics used during surgery.

It's important to check with your cancer specialist before using mistletoe extracts. Mistletoe therapy may sometimes be available through the NHS.

Herbal medicines

Herbal medicines use plants or mixtures of plant extracts to treat illness and promote health. Herbs were commonly used in the UK before the development of modern medicines, and they are still widely used by many people for common illnesses. Practitioners of Chinese medicine also use herbs as part of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Herbs may be boiled in water and drunk as a tea, mixed in an alcohol solution, or be made into tablets, creams or ointments.

Commonly used herbs include:

- **ginger** – used to relieve feelings of sickness (nausea)
- **echinacea** – used to try to help the immune system overcome infections, such as the common cold
- **St John's Wort** – used to treat low mood and mild to moderate depression.

Although plants and herbs are natural, this doesn't automatically mean they are safe. Natural substances can have powerful effects and cause side effects. So, if you choose to take herbal remedies it's important to use them safely and to be aware of possible side effects they may cause.

If you take or are interested in trying herbal medicines, talk to your cancer specialist about this. Knowing about all the medicines you're taking, whether prescription or otherwise, will help your doctor give you the best possible care. If you're seeing a herbalist, check that they are registered with an accredited body.

Taking herbs during cancer treatment

Some herbs can interfere with cancer treatments by making them less effective or by increasing side effects. For example, St John's Wort can reduce the effectiveness of the chemotherapy drug irinotecan. It can also make your skin more sensitive to light (photosensitive) and could increase skin reactions to radiotherapy. Drinking green tea may make the cancer medicine bortezomib (Velcade®) less effective. It could also increase the side effects caused by the chemotherapy drug irinotecan and by the hormonal therapy tamoxifen. Some herbs are also best avoided before surgery. For example garlic, evening primrose oil and ginkgo may affect blood clotting. Other herbal remedies may interact with painkilling drugs or with anaesthetics.

Although we know about some of the interactions between herbs and cancer treatments, a herbal supplement may contain dozens of compounds and all of its active ingredients may not be known. So it's often not possible to know the effects of the herbs and possible interactions with other medicines or treatments.

Because of this, many doctors advise that herbal medicines should be avoided during, and for a few weeks before and after, treatment with chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Some herbs and dietary supplements can interfere with cancer treatments by making them more toxic or less effective. It's important to check with your cancer specialist if you're planning to use herbal medicines or take supplements during, and for a few weeks before and after, cancer treatment.

You can find a registered herbal practitioner from the Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine. Contact them on **01603 623 994** or visit their website **rchm.co.uk** for more information.

Diet

Many people make changes to their diet after a cancer diagnosis as a way of staying as healthy as possible. They may also do this to help their body cope with the effects of cancer and its treatments. Along with giving up smoking and increasing physical activity, following a healthy diet is one of the most important changes people can make for their general health.

However, there's no scientific evidence that eating a particular diet or cutting out certain foods can treat cancer.

Most doctors and specialist nurses recommend a well-balanced diet that you enjoy. Your doctor, specialist nurse or dietitian can give you advice on healthy eating.

'It was very important...psychologically for me to look at my lifestyle, look at my diet.'

You may find our booklets *Diet and cancer* and *Recipes from Macmillan Cancer Support* useful. They can give you ideas and tips on how to get the nutrition you need if you have eating problems because of cancer or its treatment. And there's information about following a healthy diet after cancer treatment in our booklet *Eating well after cancer*.

Our website also has a useful video with tips for healthy eating, at **macmillan.org.uk/dietandlifestyle**

You can also get nutritional advice from Penny Brohn Cancer Care. Their approach to healthy eating aims to support the health and well-being of people with cancer and is based on current evidence on nutrition and cancer.

You can contact them on **0845 123 2310** or visit their website **pennybrohncancercare.org** for more information.

Nutritional therapists

Nutritional therapists focus on using diet as part of your body's healing process. They don't aim to cure cancer through diet, but try to improve the natural health of the body. A nutritional therapist will assess your general health and recommend a diet that's specific to your needs. There's no evidence that nutritional therapy can cure a cancer or reduce the chance of it coming back.

You can get more information about nutritional therapy and finding a registered therapist from the British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy (**bant.org.uk**).

Dietary supplements

We need nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids, for our bodies to work properly. The best way to get these nutrients is by eating a healthy diet. However, some people with cancer aren't able to get all the nutrients they need from their diet. This may be because of problems with eating or because their bodies aren't able to absorb the nutrients.

If you're concerned that you might not be able to follow a balanced diet or get the nutrition you need from your food, you can ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a dietitian. They can give you advice on what to eat and may prescribe nutritional supplements for you. If you aren't able to eat a healthy, balanced diet, your doctor may prescribe a daily multivitamin and multi-mineral supplement to give you the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of the nutrients you need.

If you're thinking of taking dietary supplements, it's important to talk to your cancer specialist about this.

Some people think that if something is good for you in small amounts, taking larger amounts is better still. But this isn't always the case. Nutrients, which are essential for our health in small amounts, can be toxic and cause unpleasant side effects when taken in large amounts. And some may interact with or lessen the effectiveness of cancer treatments.

Despite a lot of research into cancer and dietary supplements, there isn't good evidence that taking them can help treat cancer or stop it coming back. But, research has found that taking certain supplements could increase the risk of some cancers developing.

Antioxidants

Antioxidants, such as vitamins A, C and E, coenzyme Q10 and selenium are some of the most commonly taken dietary supplements.

Antioxidants can help to prevent cell damage. Because of this some doctors have concerns that taking antioxidant supplements during cancer treatment may interfere with the effectiveness of the treatment. Your cancer specialist may recommend that you don't take antioxidant supplements during your cancer treatment, unless it's as part of a clinical research trial.

If you want more detailed information about a particular antioxidant or dietary supplement, call us on 0808 808 00 00.

More information and support

If you have any questions about cancer, ask Macmillan. If you need support, ask Macmillan. Or if you just want someone to talk to, ask Macmillan. Our cancer support specialists are here for everyone living with cancer, whatever you need.

**Call free on 0808 808 00 00, Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm
www.macmillan.org.uk**

**To order a copy of *Cancer and complementary therapies*,
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