

Complementary therapies and epilepsy



Complementary therapies may help to promote wellbeing and underlying health as well as reduce stress. As the term 'complementary' suggests, these therapies may help alongside any anti-seizure medication (ASM) you may be taking. It is important **not to change or stop** your medication without consulting the doctor who treats your epilepsy, because this could increase the number or frequency of your seizures, or cause unwanted side effects.

There is a wide range of complementary therapies. People respond differently, and some therapies may help reduce seizures for some people, and not others. Some therapies may help improve epilepsy indirectly because they make a person feel better generally.

Some therapies can increase the risk of seizures

It is important to know as much as possible about your own epilepsy, and the complementary therapies you are interested in. To help make sure treatments are suitable for you, always use a qualified therapist and tell them about your epilepsy, your seizures, any other conditions you have, and any medication that you take.

Some complementary therapists are covered by statutory regulation, such as chiropractors and osteopaths. Some therapies, such as homeopathy, have been available for some time and have their own professional councils that have standards of training, practice and ethics for their members.

Some therapies are newer and may have little or no regulation.

It is not always easy to work out the qualifications and experience of a complementary therapist as regulation is not as well developed as in other areas of healthcare. This makes it hard to distinguish between an experienced practitioner and someone who has had little training.

You can see whether the complementary therapy you are interested in has a professional body, and if so, you can check their standards and register of members. A personal recommendation of a highly regarded practitioner can be reassuring. But it is also a good idea to do your own research to help you make your choice.

It is important to talk to your doctor before trying any complementary therapy.

Visit nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine

Relaxation therapies

Massage and aromatherapy

There are various types of massage including:

- Indian head massage (of the head, shoulders and arms);
- Swedish massage (from the neck down);
- Holistic massage (of the whole body); and
- Shiatsu (using acupressure which is pressure on acupuncture points).

Massage is often used to reduce tension and pain in muscles, help with poor sleep patterns, improve relaxation, and reduce stress. All types of massage can be carried out with or without oil, and can involve the use of aromatherapy oils (see essential oils on page 2).

Massage therapy can generally be safe and even beneficial for people with epilepsy but stress, over-stimulation, or other factors during a massage session may potentially trigger a seizure. Always talk to your epilepsy doctor before trying any complementary therapy and let the therapist know about your epilepsy and triggers.

Visit the General Council for Soft Tissue Therapies at gcmt.org.uk

Visit the Shiatsu Society at shiatusociety.org

This factsheet looks at complementary therapies that some people may find helpful, as well as some that may make epilepsy worse. These therapies are not meant to replace treatment with anti-seizure medication.

Helpline 01494 601400
Confidential, national call rate.
Information and emotional support.
Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/helpline
for opening hours.

What are essential oils and how do they work?

Aromatherapy uses pure essential oils, that are extracted from plants. Some oils have a relaxing effect on the body and the brain, for example lavender. Some oils have a stimulating effect on the body and brain, for example bergamot.

Essential oils are diluted in a 'base' oil (a plain oil such as a vegetable or nut oil) and used for massage, or they can be diluted and used in a burner to produce an aroma that is inhaled.

Many essential oils are freely available to buy, but this does not necessarily mean that they are all safe to use. Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or qualified aromatherapist before you use essential oils bought over the counter or on the internet.

Are any essential oils not recommended for use in epilepsy?

It is thought that some essential oils may trigger seizures, and so are **not** recommended for use by people with epilepsy. Essential oils that are **not** recommended include:

- Rosemary, fennel, sage, eucalyptus, hyssop, wormwood, camphor, and spike lavender.

To find a therapist visit fht.org.uk/therapies/aromatherapy

Can any essential oils help my epilepsy?

There are a number of essential oils that are known to have a calming and relaxing effect. If someone's seizures are triggered by stress, then using these oils to relax may help to reduce seizures.

Calming oils include:

- Jasmine, ylang ylang, camomile, and lavender
(**not spike lavender which is not recommended**).

Research carried out at the University of Birmingham's seizure clinic involved using essential oils with individuals who had epilepsy.

The studies used aromatherapy massage to allow individuals to associate the smell of an essential oil with a state of relaxation. Then, when a person was stressed or felt that a seizure was about to start, they were encouraged to smell the essential oil they had previously associated with a calm state.

This triggers the limbic system, a part of the brain involved in smell, which appeared to divert a seizure for some people.

Results showed that, with practice, a person may be able to prevent a seizure by simply smelling the particular oil which could then lead to fewer seizures.

Reflexology

Reflexology is based on the idea that certain points on the feet and hands (reflex points) relate to other parts of the body. The therapist uses pressure on these points to release tension and encourage the body's natural healing processes. Reflexology can be helpful in reducing stress and making you feel relaxed, and can support wellbeing and underlying health.

There is some evidence that reflexology may help to reduce seizures for some people.

To find a local reflexologist visit britreflex.co.uk

Relaxation techniques

Relaxing activities such as meditation, visualisation, yoga, or slow, focused breathing can help reduce stress and so help to reduce seizures for some people.

Meditation can be a very good way of relaxing, releasing you from stress or anxiety and coping with fatigue and mental tiredness.

Over time, practising meditation can help to clear the mind and to focus. It can also help with headaches and can promote wellbeing. The benefits of meditation may not be obvious at first, and a beginner can get disheartened. It can be best to start with a very simple meditation technique for just a few minutes a day, and gradually build up.

Both meditation and deep breathing can impact electrical activity in the brain and central nervous system, and can be powerful. An experienced instructor who fully understands these techniques can guide you.

If your seizures tend to happen when you are very relaxed, or during sleep, then deeply relaxing activities such as meditation and hypnotherapy may increase your risk of having seizures.

Holistic therapies

Holistic therapies aim to treat the whole person, rather than an individual condition or specific symptoms.

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine uses extracts from plants to restore the natural balance of the body and encourage healing. Herbs have been used for thousands of years across the world by many different cultures to treat different health problems, including epilepsy.

There is a lack of evidence for their benefit, but that does not mean that some herbal medicine may not benefit some people. Some plants have been known for centuries for their medicinal properties, but some are poisonous, and 'natural' medicines may have adverse side effects in the same way as man-made medicines.

Medicines containing herbs such as schizandra, kava kava and comfrey may increase seizures for some people. Some remedies may contain unlisted ingredients, which could affect someone's epilepsy or their existing treatment. Also some herbal remedies may affect the way ASMs work, which can reduce the effectiveness of an ASM or cause harmful side effects.

St John's Wort is a herbal treatment used for depression and other conditions. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) recommends that people taking ASM do **not** take St John's Wort because it can affect the way ASMs work. Anyone already taking St John's Wort and ASM is advised to talk to their doctor about the risks and benefits. It is important to speak to your doctor before stopping St John's Wort or making any changes to your current treatment, as this may affect the balance of the treatment that is working for you.

Evening primrose oil is a herbal extract used for various conditions, including pre-menstrual symptoms. Past reports have warned that evening primrose oil may trigger seizures for people with epilepsy, but other researchers say there is no evidence for this risk.

The doctor who treats your epilepsy can advise you about the possible effects of a herbal medicine on your epilepsy and your current treatment.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is a holistic therapy which treats a person's individual situation. Homeopathic doctors investigate a person's health, life, and feelings in great detail. They may prescribe small doses of individually prepared natural substances to encourage the body to heal naturally.

Although there is no evidence that homeopathic treatments directly help epilepsy, such an individual approach may help people feel better generally, and more in control of their epilepsy.

Visit homeopathy-uk.org

Ayurvedic medicine

Ayurveda is an ancient Indian health care system that has become very popular in the West in recent years. It covers all aspects of health and uses a combination of herbal medicine, diet, massage, yoga, and meditation to treat a variety of conditions.

Ayurveda aims to deal with underlying health imbalances and promote wellbeing. As with any treatments of this kind, especially medicines and meditation, it is important to think about your epilepsy.

A common part of Ayurvedic treatment includes purging (cleansing) of the digestive system by using a substance to cause vomiting or diarrhoea. This can affect the level of epilepsy medication in the blood, which could trigger seizures in some people.

As with other medicines that have not gone through clinical trials, some may be safe and others harmful. Case studies have been reported of some Ayurvedic medicines containing poisons such as arsenic, mercury, or lead.

Because of the great popularity of Ayurveda, Ayurvedic treatments are easy to buy on the internet or over the counter. Find out about the ingredients of any Ayurvedic medications you are thinking of taking and ask your own doctor about these substances before you take them.

Visit the [Ayurvedic Practitioners Association](https://ayurvedicpractitioners.org) at apa.uk.com/

Traditional Chinese medicine

Traditional Chinese medicine is an ancient holistic system based on the idea of a life force (qi or chi) and of balance (yin and yang).

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Treatment for epilepsy may include three main approaches: herbal medicines, acupuncture, and Tui Na (massage using acupressure focusing on the unblocking of 'qi' points).

Chinese herbal medicines tend to be compounds of different substances, and you won't necessarily know what is in them. Cases have been reported of Chinese herbal medicines for epilepsy containing anti-seizure medication such as phenobarbital.

Apart from potential interactions with any other ASMs a person may be on, any ASM needs to be prescribed carefully to ensure the correct dose and type of drug for that person.

Other ethical concerns include the use of animal products in some herbal medicines. Always consult your doctor before taking herbal medicines, whether prescribed or bought 'over the counter'.

Acupuncture is one part of traditional Chinese medicine. It involves inserting very fine pins or needles into specific points on a person's body to stimulate energy pathways and natural healing processes. The needles may be left inserted for a few seconds, but are more commonly left in place for 30 – 40 minutes.

Although there has been no evidence that acupuncture can directly help a person's epilepsy, it has been found to be effective in reducing stress and anxiety, which may then result in fewer seizures for some people with epilepsy. It can also improve wellbeing and underlying health.

Some GP surgeries are now making acupuncture available to patients, sometimes through the NHS for some conditions, but most patients pay for private treatment.

Visit acupuncture.org.uk or nhs.uk/conditions/acupuncture

Training and psychological therapies

Autogenic training

Autogenic training is a series of mental exercises which bring about relaxation similar to certain meditative states. The exercises aim to help the person become calm. Some people who have this therapy report having better emotional balance, coping ability, wellbeing, quality of sleep, ability to relax, confidence, and energy. They also report decreased anxiety, irritability, and reactions to stress.

Autogenic therapists work in the NHS with several based at the Autogenic training clinic at the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (RLHIM).

You can ask to be referred to the RLHIM by your consultant, or for more information visit britishautogenicsociety.uk

Neurofeedback (biofeedback)

Neurofeedback therapy involves placing electrodes on the scalp to monitor brainwave activity. This is similar to having an EEG (electroencephalogram).

During therapy data is recorded and played back to the person using images and sounds so they can see how their brainwaves can change their thoughts.

The aim is to create healthier brainwave patterns to change any negative effects and control brain function. This may help to limit the length of focal seizures or stop them spreading to become a generalised seizure.

However, currently there is no scientific evidence that neurofeedback actually works, other than as a placebo. A placebo is something that appears to be a real medical treatment but is not (such as a sugar pill). Sometimes a person may have a response to a placebo but this is believed to be because they expect the placebo to have an effect.

Neurofeedback is not available on the NHS and can be expensive, time-consuming, and its benefits are not long-lasting.

If you are looking for private treatment, it is important to find a practitioner with knowledge of epilepsy and neurofeedback research.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/epileptic-seizures for more information about focal seizures.

Psychological therapies

Psychological therapies may include relaxation techniques to release the tension in your body and relax your muscles. Behaviour modification therapy is another psychological approach.

Relaxation therapy combined with behaviour modification therapy is used for both children and adults. There is evidence that they may help some people feel less anxious, and can also help them adjust to having epilepsy. Research suggests that psychological therapies may improve wellbeing in people with epilepsy.

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These therapies may be offered by some psychologists with an interest in epilepsy.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/anxiety

Cannabis-based products

Cannabis-based products include medical cannabis and cannabidiol oil (CBD oil). Medical cannabis must be prescribed by a qualified healthcare professional and is only prescribed for specific types of epilepsy.

CBD oil is available to buy over the internet, without a prescription. However, it could be that most of these products may be illegal in the UK. It's possible that they may not be safe to use.

Some health stores sell certain types of CBD. However, NHS information suggests that there's no guarantee these products are of good quality, or that they give any health benefits.

If you do decide to use CBD it's important to let your epilepsy specialist know as it might affect the way your existing ASM works.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/alcohol-drugs-and-epilepsy and nhs.uk/conditions/medical-cannabis

Pregnancy

Not all "natural" remedies or complementary therapies are safe in pregnancy. You should talk to your doctor if you are thinking of using complementary therapy and should let the therapist know that you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Visit nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/medicines

Further information

Epilepsy: complementary and alternative treatments.
Baxendale, S. (2012) Sheldon Press.

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

cnhc.org.uk

Holds a register of regulated therapists in several fields mentioned in this factsheet. You can search the CNHC register for a local therapy practitioner.

Therapy Directory

therapy-directory.org.uk

Information on complementary and alternative therapies, and a nationwide database of professional complementary and alternative therapists.

Epilepsy Society is grateful to Dr F J Rugg-Gunn, Consultant Neurologist & Honorary Associate Professor, Clinical Lead, Chalfont Centre for Epilepsy, who reviewed this information.

For a printed copy of this information contact our helpline.

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