

Complementary and Alternative Healthcare and Natural Health Products

Many people, the healthy as well as the ill, participate in complementary and alternative healthcare practices, including the consumption of natural health products. The users of these practices and products often claim benefits from them that they say are not supplied by mainstream western medicine.

Complementary and alternative healthcare (CAH) refers to practices that claim to complement mainstream medicine by contributing to a common whole and by satisfying a demand not met by conventional approaches. Natural health products (NHPs) refer to herbs, vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, and homeopathies. Massage and meditation are complementary practices that have become quite common in chronic disease management, if only because, when used properly, they do no harm and can make patients feel better.

There is very little scientific evidence to support the safety and effectiveness of many CAHC and NHP claims and in some specific cases treatments may be detrimental to a person with a disease such as MND, or anyone on medication.

However, there are certainly legitimate practices, such as massage and supplement use (e.g., vitamin E) that may have a positive effect on feelings of well-being. MND Scotland is supportive of

MND Scotland is the only charity funding research and providing care and information for those affected by MND in Scotland.

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you and your doctor working together to find what works best for you. If you are seeing an alternative practitioner, let your medical doctor know as you need to take care that nothing interferes with the medicines you are taking to manage MND symptoms.

No matter how desperate you are to find a cure for MND, be very wary of unconventional treatments that make claims of being able to "cure" or "reverse MND." Usually the people offering these "cures" charge hundreds to tens of thousands of pounds leaving families unable to pay for essentials or for needed traditional symptom management treatments. Unfortunately, many of the people pushing these claims are making a lucrative living at the expense of people who are looking for hope.

Recently "stem cell pills" were being promoted as though they are stem cells themselves at a cost of about £200 per month despite several factors that would render them entirely ineffective as medication.

Firstly, the material they are made from is processed to form a pill. It has therefore lost the biological properties of stem cells which need to be alive to be effective. Secondly, the alleged stem cells from which the dried pills are made are described as "Ovine" in origin. This means they are derived from sheep, which would be useless for treating humans anyway. Thirdly, they are labelled as a food supplement, not as a

medicine. Medicines need to be licensed and do what they say, food supplements don't.

By all means read and educate yourself on complementary and alternative treatments, but bear in mind that if any alternative treatment was even half as affective as some of them claim in treating or curing MND they would be taken up and trumpeted by support groups world wide. The silence of these groups speaks volumes about the accuracy of "miracle cure" claims.

The following information takes a look at massage, meditation, and NHPs in general terms.

Massage and Touch Therapies

Touch therapies can be very relaxing and comforting for people with MND. They can warm up limbs, which often feel cold because of inactivity, low circulation and decreased muscle mass. Though touch therapies are usually given by a carer or therapist, self-massage can also be very beneficial. It is important to talk to your doctor before receiving massage therapy. The easiest touch therapy to learn is massage. For the most beneficial massage, body oil is used to lubricate the skin, which aids in soothing and relaxing the muscles. Massage involves systematically stroking, kneading and pressing the soft tissues of the body with fingers and the palm of the hand, working on the muscles, ligaments and tendons. A complete massage covers the entire body, inducing a state of warmth and relaxation. However a massage of parts of the body, such as arms, legs or shoulders is also beneficial and will help improve circulation.

While massage therapy should not make MND any worse, modifications in

technique may be required and should be done so under medical consultation.

Therapeutic Massage:

Many cultures around the world have their own preferred methods of massage. In general therapeutic massage aims to help improve muscle tone, blood circulation and movement in the lymphatic system.

Reflexology:

Reflexology is based on the theory that pressing and massaging certain points in the feet or hands will affect the whole body and induce relaxation.

Aromatherapy:

Aromatherapy is a massage that involves the use of fragrant oils, which penetrate the skin, adding another sense of pleasure to relaxation. Some of these oils have active ingredients that may interfere with the functioning of prescription drugs.

Indian Head Massage:

This massage is a very light and gentle massage of the back of the head and neck. It finishes with a soothing face massage. Head massage does not require the removal of clothing.

The cost of most massage treatments ranges between £20 and £75 for sessions up to an hour in length. Most of these treatments are not provided by the mainstream NHS but may be available through day-hospice arrangements or their costs covered in whole or in part by private health insurance if they are prescribed and/or delivered by a registered therapist.

MND Scotland also offers some of these therapies in different parts of the country. Since we rely on having qualified volunteers to do this it is best to contact

us on 0141 332 3903 to find out if a service is available in your area.

Tens Machine:

A Tens Machine (Transdermal Electronic Nerve Stimulator) stimulates muscles through electronic impulses, and is often used by physiotherapists to exercise individual muscles or muscle groups. Tens machines should never be used on the body above the waist as they operate by sending a light electrical current into the muscles and can affect the electrical impulses that control heart rhythm.

Meditation

Meditation is a way to relax and revitalise both mind and body, and can be practised in many ways. Technically, meditation is deliberately entering into an inner silence and stillness for a certain period of time, usually 15-20 minutes. It has been practised over the centuries by many different cultures and in many different ways. Referring to the results of researching meditation, in his book *The Relaxation Response*, (Avon Books) Dr Herbert Benson writes, that meditation creates an overall awareness of relaxation and a feeling of well-being. Breathing and heart rate slow down, blood pressure drops, and there is an increase of healing alpha waves from the brain. In other words, meditation can reduce stress, and relax muscles.

Meditation techniques can be divided into two categories. One type of meditation involves concentrating on something, such as your breathing, a candle flame, a religious object, or even rolling surf, while peacefully and silently repeating a mantra, a special word or sound. Any word that contributes to inner peacefulness can work. The other type of meditation also involves repeating a mantra, but the objective is to relax your

mind entirely. When thoughts come into your mind, you try to relax, observe the thoughts and let them flow, without participating in the thought process. For most people, this takes practice.

Before starting to meditate it is usually best to let other people in your house know that you don't want to be disturbed.

Many meditation teachers suggest that, for the best results, meditation should be done twice a day, for about twenty minutes, with your eyes closed. When you think about 20 minutes is up, gently open your eyes and look at your watch. Two common problems for those new to meditation are being unable to relax as their minds are so full of thoughts and/or when they are finally relaxed, they fall asleep.

It takes daily practice and time to develop the ability to achieve a state of conscious relaxation. Sometimes quiet, peaceful music can help the mind calm down, but in later phases of meditation that may be too distracting.

There are several other techniques to help clear the mind, and achieve a state of relaxation, including music therapy and visualisation therapy. Books on this subject can provide patients with knowledge of these techniques, instructions, exercises and many hours of quiet pleasure. Your nurse, social worker, occupational therapist, or other mental health professional may also be good resources for information and training.

Natural Health Products (NHPs)

Vitamins, herbs and other so-called complementary or alternative medicines (natural health products) have become so popular over the last few years, it is

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therefore appropriate to say a few things about these potential remedies in the context of research. People with MND can be particularly attracted to these remedies either because drug trials so far have been unsuccessful, or because of the perception that alternative medicines are natural

Stories circulate on the internet about people who have been cured by these products, usually these “testimonies” are found on a site selling the product, so treat these with extreme caution. One sure-fire way of spotting a fraud is when the same product is touted as a cure for several debilitating or terminal conditions.

While extensive and rigorously controlled research is done for pharmaceutical drugs before they can go to market, much less research is done on “natural” health products - with the exception of vitamins which have been extensively researched. It is well known that animal and plant by-products have provided the basis for many successful drugs; unfortunately, the hundreds of millions of pounds required

to thoroughly test pharmaceutical medicines are not available to test alternative medicines. Scientifically, little is known about the effect of alternative medicines on the human body. On the other hand many “natural” health products have been used by some cultures for hundreds and even thousands of years.

Simply because a product is deemed “natural” does not mean that it is harmless if taken in excess. Opium in its simplest form is the dried sap gathered from the seed pods of the opium poppy. One of the common problems with plant extracts is the varying amounts of active ingredients found in different batches. This was recognised by the early prescribers of extracts from foxgloves (Digitalin) for the treatment of heart disease, where every new batch had to have the dose tested by increasing the dose one drop at a time until the correct dose was found for that batch. Nowadays reliable synthetic forms of these extracts are prescribed in the form of Digoxin and Digitoxin.

Further Information

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