

Natural therapies & supplements

Natural therapies (naturopathy) cover many approaches. Some of the more popular therapies include acupuncture, herbal treatments, homoeopathy, nutrition, massage and traditional Chinese medicine.

Naturopathy involves treating the whole person, including the underlying causes of problems and symptoms. This is why natural therapies are often called 'holistic' medicine. To treat holistically, patterns of thought, behaviour and culture must all be considered when assessing and treating your health complaint.

Choosing to use natural and complementary therapies is best done after being informed of the benefits and risks, and considering any relevant scientific research. Some natural therapies have scientific data to support their use, such as acupuncture for low back pain, omega-3 for secondary prevention of heart disease, black cohosh for menopause symptoms and St John's wort for mild depression. Further research and testing in clinical trials is still needed.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies or medicines are not used instead of, but alongside and in addition to, other therapies and medicines

Alternative therapies

Alternative therapies are alternatives to mainstream western medicine, although this term is used less often today. Practitioners in the profession prefer the term 'natural therapies'.

Common natural and complementary therapies

Acupuncture

In acupuncture, needles are inserted at specific points located on acupuncture channels to stimulate and regulate the energy (Qi), which is transported around the body through these channels.

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine uses medicines exclusively made from plants. This is the oldest and most widely used system of medicine in the world. In Australia the most common types of herbal medicine are:

- Western (based on European herbal medicine traditions)
- Chinese
- Ayurvedic (Indian)
- Aboriginal

Evidence on the effectiveness of herbal medicine, including clinical trials, has shown positive effects of some herbs. For example, the herb Valerian has been shown to improve sleep quality in postmenopausal women experiencing insomnia, and black cohosh can reduce the number and intensity of menopausal hot flushes and help with vaginal dryness.



Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on the principle that 'like cures like'. Highly diluted natural substances are given that if given in undiluted form would cause the same illness in a healthy person. Homeopathy prescribing is highly specific to an individual's symptom profile. This makes it difficult to study using clinical trials because no two treatments are the same.

Nutrition

Therapy based on nutrition may involve:

- advice to provide essential nutrients for health and illness prevention
- identifying potential food intolerances related to health problems (eg fructose and lactose intolerances)
- the use of diet and nutritional supplements to treat a problem

Remedial massage

Remedial massage therapy involves the use of therapeutic massage for the treatment of muscle tension, tendon and ligament injuries. Massage techniques may include relaxation, deep tissue, shiatsu and trigger point techniques.

Vitamin and mineral supplements

A well-balanced diet should provide all the vitamins and minerals you need. For reasons such as illness, this is not always achievable, and some high risk groups, vegetarians and pregnant women for example, have increased requirements for certain nutrients.

Research shows that some supplements such as calcium, folate, iodine, iron, omega-3, vitamin B12 and vitamin D have benefits, particularly when prescribed based on individual need.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)

TCM includes Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and Chinese remedial therapy. Research into TCM is extensive, particularly in Asia. Some evidence-based clinical trials support its use.

Side effects

A preference for natural therapy is sometimes based on the idea that natural therapies are safe and side effects do not occur. This is not always the case. It's important to understand these remedies should be prescribed by a trained practitioner. As with any therapy, natural or pharmaceutical, careful review of potential side effects should be undertaken together with your health practitioner before use.

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/natural-therapies-supplements

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner. References are available on request.

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