Welcome to this Choices leaflet about complementary and other therapies...

MS-UK believes we must listen to the voices of people affected by multiple sclerosis (MS) to shape the information and support we provide. It is these people that bring us perspectives that no one else can give.

For every Choices leaflet we produce, MS-UK consults the wider MS community to gather feedback and uses this to inform our content. All of our Choices leaflets are then reviewed by the MS-UK Virtual Insight Panel before they are published.

This Choices leaflet has been designed with you in mind. We hope it will answer some of your questions and also provide some first-hand experience from those who have been in your position - people who can truly understand and empathise with your current thoughts and feelings.

Every time you see a box with an icon like this, it is a quote directly from someone affected by multiple sclerosis.
Complementary and other therapies

Many people with multiple sclerosis (MS) use complementary and other therapies. These can be in addition or complementary to conventional treatments including disease-modifying therapies. They are generally used to create an overall sense of wellbeing.

It is estimated that around 70 per cent of people with MS have used a form of complementary or other therapy to treat their symptoms (1). The results of a recent short survey by MS-UK showed the most common therapies tried by people with MS are massage and reflexology.

A qualified complementary therapist will aim to treat the whole person and not just the symptoms. Each person is treated as an individual and any treatment is tailored to the specific needs of that person.

One of the main advantages of using these treatments is that it puts you in charge of decisions around your own health - doing something positive to help yourself.

Go for it, if you don’t try you might never know what works for you.

Research is limited in evaluating the safety and effectiveness of complementary therapies in MS (1). This is because the nature of complementary therapies mean that it is difficult to conduct a ‘double-blind’ trial - a research method used in the scientific community to prove the safety and effectiveness of a medicine or
Many people receiving complementary therapies report that they find them beneficial. If you are considering trying a complementary therapy, it is important to find a reputable therapist who is fully insured and a member of a professional body. You can contact the complementary therapy’s organising body to find a therapist near you. See further information for details of how to find a practitioner in your area.

All practitioners should be fully aware of any potential contraindications and will advise of these if relevant.

Some of the more commonly used therapies amongst people with MS are:

Reflexology, massage, yoga, relaxation, meditation, aromatherapy, and acupuncture (2).

Please note - before booking any treatment please remember to check the cost of the treatment you choose, particularly if there is more than one session required.

There are a number of other therapies that you may be interested in. These may not all be covered in the following pages. Please contact MS-UK and we will find out more for you.
Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been practised for thousands of years, originating from China. It works with the energy (or ‘qi’) of the body which flows through channels or meridians. It is believed that acupuncture stimulates the nervous system and causes the release of neurochemicals to promote physical and emotional wellbeing.

Acupuncture involves the use of very fine sterile needles, which pierce the skin to reach an acupuncture point. They are inserted very precisely and connect with the body’s qi. It is not considered painful, just a small prick to the skin and maybe a dull ache for a few seconds when the point is reached (3). Some people find they benefit quite quickly, others require more extensive treatment and for some it may not provide the results they are looking for.

For MS, acupuncture is used to help relieve pain and tension, improve movement, sensation and spasticity. It may help eye problems and bladder urgency. It may also help to reduce fatigue, increase energy levels and give a boost to the immune system.

APS Therapy

APS stands for Action Potential Simulation. It helps to stimulate the body’s own healing mechanisms. The APS machine sends a microcurrent signal to the human body to start the bodies own action potential and release cellular energy.

Try different therapies to find out what one/s work for you best, although give them a chance as not every therapy will feel like it’s helping after only one session.
APS Therapy is a safe, effective, drug free treatment for pain relief, which can also enhance recovery or injury repair, and improve energy levels (4). It is applied in a similar way to a TENS machine but works in a different way.

Conditions that have been successfully treated include muscular pain, nerve pain, neuropathy, restless leg syndrome, chronic fatigue, insomnia, headaches (5).

**Aromatherapy**

This uses powerful, fragrant essential oils with massage to help you feel relaxed or energised. Essential oils are the essence of the plant. They are extracted from herbs, flowers, shrubs or trees. Each one is different with its own fragrance and therapeutic use. Some oils have anti-inflammatory properties, others bring about a feeling of relaxation and others are stimulating.

An aromatherapy massage can help to relax the whole body, improve sleep, reduce pain, help with the mobility of joints and muscles, and provide an improved sense of wellbeing (6).

I have benefitted greatly with pain relief in my back and stopping of leg spasms. Now working to improve movement in leg. Looking to purchase machine to use at home.
Chiropractic

This is a system of gentle manipulation of the body to treat disorders of the joints, ligaments and muscles and their effect on the nervous system. It is used for back pain, neck pain, headaches, migraine and sports injuries. In MS, many of the musculoskeletal symptoms could be managed with physical therapy (7).

Treatment consists of a wide range of manipulation techniques designed to improve the function of the joints, relieving pain and muscle spasm.

Massage

This is one of the oldest known therapies and has been used for thousands of years to help ease stiffness in muscles and joints, relieve pain, improve blood and lymph circulation, and increase wellbeing. It can also be used to stimulate the various systems of the body and can also help with posture, ease stress and release tension. It has been found that massage lowers anxiety, reduces pain, promotes relaxation and improves patient wellbeing (8).

There are a number of different types of massage, some gentle, others more vigorous. These include:

- Therapeutic massage – a traditional type of massage. Good for relieving aching joints and muscles
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage – a very gentle massage. Works on the circulation of the lymph, stimulating lymphatic drainage

Massage, reflexology and reiki helped me to relax and eased sore muscles.
• Shiatsu – a very stimulating massage where firm pressure is applied to acupressure points. It helps with a range of symptoms, including depression, constipation and low vitality
• Aromatherapy massage – Relaxing massage where essential oils are used to help give symptomatic relief with sleep, relaxation, joint mobility and an improved sense of wellbeing

There are many other types of massage therapy that may also provide some symptomatic relief.

Being able to relax relieves muscle spasms and spasticity.

Meditation

This is an ancient practice by which a person learns to be present in the moment, allowing them to become more relaxed, and peaceful. It helps to slow the mind and be more kind and gentle to yourself. It is seen by researchers to be one of the most effective forms of stress reduction and has the potential to improve quality of life (9).

Meditation helps me to relax.

Meditation encourages a gradual release of all thoughts and feelings. There are a number of different forms of meditation including transcendental meditation and mindfulness (see page 10).
It provides the individual with a number of health benefits including stress reduction, relieving anxiety, depression and also reduction in pain (10).

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice and according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, it is a practice which is very relevant for life today (11). Mindfulness exercises are ways of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing, and yoga.

"I use mindfulness a lot. You only need a small amount of time to switch off from everything to help you feel calmer. I use mindfulness to get to sleep at night."

Training helps people to become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and body sensations so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, they’re better able to manage them.

Practising mindfulness can give more insight into emotions, boost attention and concentration, and improve relationships.

"It won’t do you any harm, give it a try. It might just do some good."
It is recommended by NICE that health professionals consider mindfulness as a way of treating MS-related fatigue (12). It is also recommended as a preventative practice for people with experience of recurrent depression (13).

If you feel that you may benefit from attending a Mindfulness course, please speak to your GP in the first instance about a referral.

**Osteopathy**

Osteopathy is based on the belief that pain and disability stems from abnormalities in the body’s structure and function. An osteopath recognises and treats problems in the bones, joints, muscles and ligaments to help the body heal naturally. When the body is balanced and working efficiently it will function with minimum wear and tear, leaving more energy for living. Treatment can involve gentle, manual techniques to help ease some symptoms of MS. A small scale study saw a reduction of fatigue in patients with relapsing remitting MS (14).

**Oxygen Therapy**

Oxygen Therapy involves breathing 100% oxygen through a mask whilst inside a pressurised metal chamber similar to that used in diving. The chamber is a sealed unit, usually large enough to seat six to eight people. Over the course of an hour, it is filled with a higher concentration of oxygen than normal air under pressure. As you breathe, the oxygen saturates your blood and tissues.

Anecdotally improvements have been experienced with fatigue levels and bladder symptoms. Although there is a lack of research supporting the effectiveness of oxygen therapy, one study suggests treatment is better in patients with less advanced disease (15).
Oxygen therapy is the only thing that clears my brain, plus it helps reduce fatigue.

Oxygen therapy is available in many MS Therapy Centres. Treatment requires regular attendance at the Centre - usually three to four times per week initially. A treatment plan may consist of a course of around 20 sessions, each one lasting an hour, spread over a month. These are followed by top-up sessions, which may vary from once a week to once a month.

It is easy to communicate with the operator at any time. All operators should be skilled and fully trained.

To find your nearest MS Therapy Centre offering oxygen therapy, please see our Choices leaflet ‘MS Therapy Centres’ or contact the MS-UK office.

**Reflexology**

Reflexology is a complementary therapy that works on the feet, lower legs, hands, face or ears, encouraging the body to restore its natural balance. Gentle pressure is applied to certain reflex points on either the hands or feet. By working on these points, blockages can be released and help to restore the free flow of energy around the body. This helps to increase energy and balance the immune system. It may also help to ease tension and improve circulation. Reflexologists should not diagnose or claim to cure, but some symptoms may be relieved through regular treatments.
Reflexology is an enjoyable, relaxing treatment. In MS, it can help reduce bladder issues, and help alleviate motor and sensory disturbances (16).

**Yoga**

Yoga originates from India and has been practiced for over 5000 years. The main components of the practice involve postures and breathing. Some studies suggest that yoga is helpful to reduce aches and pains and lower back pain. It can also increase physical activity, especially strength, flexibility and balance (17).

I found yoga energises me, concentrates the mind and improves my balance. But also deep breathing and meditation help with my mental health and staves off depression.

For MS, yoga has been shown to help reduce fatigue and may also help to improve depression, anxiety, pain and spasticity (10).
Further information

Association of Reflexologists
Victoria House, Victoria Street, Taunton, Somerset TA1 3FA
Call 01823 351010
Fax 01823 336646
Email info@aor.org.uk
www.aor.org.uk

BMAS Northwich
BMAS House, 2/3 Winnington Court, Northwich, Cheshire CW8 1AQ
Call 01606 786782
Fax 01606 786783
Email admin@thebmas.com
www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

British Chiropractic Association
Head Office, 59 Castle Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 7SN
Call 0118 950 5950
Email enquiries@chiropractic-uk.co.uk
www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk
The British Medical Acupuncture Society
BMAS London, Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine, 60 Great Ormond St, London WC1N 3HR
Call 020 7713 9437
Fax 020 7713 6286
Email london@thebmas.com
www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

British Meditation Society
PO Box 26, Chard, Somerset TA20 2JT
Call 01460 62921
www.britishmeditationsociety.org

The British Wheel of Yoga
25 Jermyn Street, Sleaford, Lincolnshire NG34 7RU
Call 01529 603851
Email office@bwy.org.uk
www.bwy.org.uk
Federation of Holistic Therapists  
(Massage, Homeopathy & other therapies)  
18 Shakespeare Business Centre, Hathaway Close, Eastleigh, Hampshire SO50 4SR  
Call 023 8062 4350  
Fax 023 8062 4399  
Email info@fht.org.uk  
www.fht.org.uk  

General Osteopathic Council  
176 Tower Bridge Road, London SE1 3LU  
Call 0207 357 6655  
Email contactus@osteopathy.org.uk  
www.osteopathy.org.uk  

The International Federation of Aromatherapists  
IFA Head Office, 146 South Ealing Road, Ealing, London W5 4 QJ  
Call 0208 564 2243  
Fax 0208 840 9288  
www.ifparoma.org
MS-UK Choices leaflet for MS Therapy centres
www.ms-uk.org/choicesleaflets

Multiple Sclerosis National Therapy
Centres (MSNTC)
PO Box 2199, Buckingham MK18 8AR
Call 01296 711699
Email info@msntc.org.uk
www.msntc.org.uk

Painfree Potential (APS Therapy)
Call 01908 799870
Email miranda@painfreepotential.co.uk
MS-UK is a national charity formed in 1993 supporting anyone affected by multiple sclerosis. Our hope for the future is a world where people affected by MS live healthier and happier lives.

MS-UK has always been at the forefront of promoting choice, of providing people with all the information and support they need to live life as they wish to with multiple sclerosis; whether that be through drugs, complementary therapies, lifestyle changes, a mixture of these or none at all.

We will always respect people’s rights to make informed decisions for themselves.

**The MS-UK Helpline**

We believe that nobody should face multiple sclerosis alone and our helpline staff are here to support you every step of the way.

Our service is informed by the lived experience of real people living with MS, so we can discuss any treatments and lifestyle choices that are of benefit, whether they are clinically evidenced or not.
New Pathways

Our bi-monthly magazine, New Pathways, is full of the latest MS news regarding trials, drug development and research as well as competitions, special offers and product reviews. The magazine connects you to thousands of other people living with MS across the country.

Available in print, audio version, large print and digitally.

MS-UK Counselling

MS-UK Counselling is open to anyone living with MS and is the only service of its kind available in the UK. Whether you want support coming to terms with a diagnosis or to improve your mental wellbeing, our counselling service is focused on helping you.

All of our MS-UK counsellors are BACP registered or accredited with an in depth knowledge of MS.
Sources


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