Arthritis information sheet

Complementary therapies

This sheet provides general information about complementary therapies for people with arthritis. It provides a summary of the current evidence about complementary therapies for arthritis as well as tips to help you use these therapies safely.

All treatments, even 'natural' ones, can have side effects. Always keep your rheumatology healthcare team informed of any treatments you are taking.

What are complementary therapies?

'Complementary therapies' are any treatments or therapies that are not part of the conventional treatment (such as medicines or surgery) of a disease. Examples of complementary therapies include acupuncture, massage, aromatherapy, vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal medicines.

Do complementary therapies work?

There is little scientific proof that complementary therapies work.

In many cases, there is little or no research. In other cases, the research is poor, so the results may be inaccurate. Before you try a complementary therapy, make sure you know whether it has been proven to help. This can stop you from being misled or given false hope. It's important to remember that complementary therapies, even when they show small benefits, are not as effective as standard medicines like disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) for treating arthritis.

Are complementary therapies safe?

Many complementary therapies have not been tested, so we don't know if they are safe. Many complementary medicines can cause side effects and may change how other medicines work (e.g. prescription medicines). This can cause serious health problems or make other medicines less effective. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before using any complementary therapy.

Working with your healthcare team

You may worry that your doctor or other members of your healthcare team will disapprove of complementary therapies. However, it is very important to keep your healthcare team informed of what you're taking, even if they do not agree.

Your rheumatology healthcare team can only give you the best advice if they know all the treatments you are using. This includes vitamin supplements, herbal medicines and other therapies.

Sharing this information helps keep you safe.

Warning signs

Be on the lookout for the following warning signs when considering a new treatment:

- It promises a cure. There is currently no cure for most forms of arthritis so be wary of products or treatments that promise a cure.
- Proof of the treatment relies only on testimonials (personal stories). This may be a sign that the treatment has not been scientifically tested to see if it works properly.
- You are told to stop taking your current medicines that are working or discouraged from getting treatment from your doctor.
- The treatment is expensive and not covered by any health funds.

The best available research on complementary therapies for arthritis is summarised below.

	Osteoarthritis (OA)	Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)
Some evidence of benefit Some quality studies show benefits		• Fish oil
Limited evidence of possible benefit Low-quality studies show benefit is possible but uncertain	• Acupuncture (knee OA) • Avocado-soybean unsaponifiables (ASU) • Ginger • Green-lipped mussel • Indian frankincense (Boswellia serrata) • Phytodolor • Pine bark extracts • Rosehip • S-adenosyl methionine (SAMe) • Curcumin (concentrated turmeric extract)	• Gamma linoleic acid (found in evening primrose oil, borage/ starflower seed oil and blackcurrant seed oil) • Curcumin (concentrated turmeric extract)
Little or no clear evidence Little or no reliable research. Benefits are highly uncertain.	• Acupuncture (hip OA) • Chinese herbal patches containing FNZG or SJG • Chondroitin • Devil's claw • Fish oil • Glucosamine sulphate • Krill oil • SJG • SKI 306X • Vitamins A, C, E • Vitamin B Complex • Willow bark extract	• Acupuncture • Krill oil • Phytodolor

Note, there are many other treatments available however these have not been demonstrated to be safe and/or effective. There is also no reliable proof that complementary therapies are effective for any other types of arthritis.

Before you start using a complementary therapy

- **Here are a few steps to help keep you safe:**
- Get the right diagnosis from your doctor to make sure you know what condition you have and what treatments you need.
- Get information about therapy. Talk to a member of your rheumatology healthcare team about the therapy you are thinking of trying. Find out if the therapy is likely to interact with your current treatments.
- Do not stop any current treatments without discussing with your rheumatology healthcare team first.
- Keep in mind that the information given to you by the person promoting the product or therapy may not be reliable, or they may have a financial incentive to recommend a specific treatment.
- Make sure the treatment or therapy is something you can afford, particularly if you need to keep using it.
- Check qualifications of practitioners involved. The websites of some professional associations are listed below for more information or to help you find an accredited practitioner.

For more information

Arthritis Australia
arthritisaustralia.org.au

Australian Rheumatology Association
rheumatology.org.au

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
racgp.org.au

Australian Physiotherapy Association
australian.physio

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Disclaimer: This sheet is published by Arthritis Australia for information purposes only and should not be used in place of medical advice.

Your local arthritis organisation has information, education and support for people with arthritis.

Call: **1800 011 041** Visit: **arthritisaustralia.org.au**

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