

Complementary Therapies and Products

www.arthritis.org.nz



**ARTHRITIS
NEW ZEALAND**

KAIPONAPONA AOTEAROA

*Improving the lives of
people affected by arthritis*

*Te whai kia pai ake te hunga
kua pāngia e te kaiponapona*

Did you know?

- Arthritis affects **one in six** New Zealanders.
- **More than 60 percent** of people with arthritis have used or are **using complementary medicine**.
- The philosophy of most complementary medicine practices is based on a **holistic approach** – meaning that each individual has his or her own ‘inner resources’ to fight and overcome illness.
- There is a **wide variety** of complementary medicine practices and products, but **only few have established scientific evidence** on their beneficial effects for arthritis.

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What is complementary medicine?

Complementary medicine includes treatments and products that are not traditionally used in conventional medicine. They range from ancient systems of medicine, for example; Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Ayurveda, to treatments such as massage, chiropractic and osteopathy, herbal medicine and aromatherapy.

Complementary medicine emphasises 'wellness' that comes from a balance between the body, the mind and the environment. Complementary medicine practitioners aim to restore this balance treating each person as a unique individual, often recommending lifestyle changes and encouraging a person to take a more active approach to their own health.

Today, the gap between conventional medicine and complementary medicine is blurring. Many complementary treatments are based on anatomy and physiology, while modern medicine is utilising a more holistic approach and has adopted some therapies that originated in complementary medicine.

The placebo effect

Before starting any complementary treatment or product it is important to check what evidence is available to suggest that it may work for you. Several complementary treatments are beginning to be backed up by scientific evidence. However, for many others it is still unclear whether they are truly effective, harmful or just a waste of time and money.

In some cases the beneficial effects of complementary medicine may last for only a short time, often without a long term benefit. This may be due to the so called 'placebo' effect, when people feel better or show physiological signs of improvement because they believe a therapy is working. More research is needed to analyse the long term results of complementary treatments.

**It is important to
check the evidence
available.**





Evidence-based complementary medicine treatments and products beneficial for arthritis

Acupuncture

Western medical acupuncture is based upon one of the most ancient systems – Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM); it involves inserting fine needles into specific points of the body realigning the flow of energy (chi). It relieves pain by diverting or changing the way in which the messages from tissues to the brain are processed and also by stimulating the body's own painkillers (the endorphins and encephalins).

Acupuncture is one of the most popular complementary medicine treatments; it is used for pain management in physiotherapy and is often combined with herbal treatments by practitioners of TCM.

There is now clear scientific evidence that acupuncture can be beneficial if you have osteoarthritis (OA) in your knees, fibromyalgia or low back pain. However,

this effect may not last for a long term and further acupuncture treatments may be required. Acupuncture is recommended for those who are not eligible for joint replacement operations or who cannot tolerate pain killers.

Acupuncture generally has a very good safety record. In less than three percent of people it may cause dizziness after a session or cause bleeding and bruising.

Nutrition and dietary supplements

Maintaining a healthy body weight is an important factor in maintaining overall health and in managing arthritis. A diet low in saturated fats and high in omega-3 and fruit and vegetables is recommended. There is some evidence that vegetarian diets can be beneficial for people with inflammatory types of arthritis. For more information on nutrition and specific foods for arthritis see our *Nutrition and Arthritis* brochure.

Supplements that can be beneficial if you have arthritis:

- **Avocado-soybean unsaponifiables** (ASU) are shown to help with pain and stiffness in osteoarthritis (OA), and in some cases reduce the progression of OA. ASU are used in the form of gel capsules containing a natural vegetable extract made from avocado and soybean oils.
- **Calcium and vitamin D.** Long term use of corticosteroids in inflammatory arthritis can lead to weak bones and the bone disease osteoporosis. Calcium plays an important role in strengthening bones and preventing osteoporosis. Exercise and eating calcium-rich foods (see our *Nutrition and Arthritis* brochure) can help you to maintain bone health providing you are not deficient in vitamin D. There is some evidence that people who have rheumatoid arthritis (RA) have low levels of vitamin D.

More research is needed to demonstrate whether vitamin D can play a role in treating rheumatoid arthritis (RA). You can get vitamin D in a variety of ways: through your skin, from your diet, by prescription and from supplements. The best way for majority of people is restore vitamin D levels through the daily outdoor activities. Seniors, people with dark skin and people with some conditions such as Crohn's disease may require vitamin D supplementation. Ask your doctor whether you need Calcium and vitamin D supplements.

- **Capsaicin** is the main active component of chilli peppers. It is available in the form of gel, cream and plasters. It works by its ability to reduce substance P, one of the chemicals involved in pain. Capsaicin can be effective in reducing pain in OA.
- **Folic acid**. Some drugs, such as methotrexate for inflammatory types of arthritis interfere with how the body uses folic acid. Taking folic acid can help to prevent side effects during methotrexate treatment. Ask your doctor or specialist how much folic acid you need to take.



- **Fish oil** has proved to be beneficial for RA. Fish oil contains anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids (EPA & DHA). Deep water fish such as tuna, sardines, mackerel and salmon are the richest sources of omega-3, but many New Zealanders do not eat enough of these fatty fish. Supplemental fish oil has been shown to help reduce joint pain, swelling, stiffness and increase joint mobility. Quite large amounts of omega-3 are needed for the best effects, so a concentrated fish oil supplement providing about 3 g of omega-3 (EPA & DHA) daily is a good option. Discuss with your doctor how much of fish oil you need to take, especially if you're taking warfarin or aspirin as your blood-thinning control may be affected.
- **Glucosamine and Chondroitin** are both natural components of cartilage. Glucosamine sulphate is a very popular supplement used for OA. Research results are inconclusive. You may want to try glucosamine sulphate with or without chondroitin for three to six months, and if your joint pain and stiffness are improved you can choose to continue these supplements. You shouldn't take glucosamine sulphate if you're allergic to shellfish. Check with your doctor before starting on glucosamine if you're taking warfarin (your blood-thinning control may be affected) or if you have high levels of sugar in the blood due to diabetes.
- **SAMe (S-adenosylmethionine)** is an active compound made from an amino acid methionine – it can be beneficial for some people with OA improving function and reducing pain. SAMe can cause mild side effects including nausea, headaches and a dry mouth. Discuss with your doctor before taking this supplement if you have asthma or other chronic conditions.

Herbal medicine

Herbal remedies have been used in many cultures since ancient times. Today about one quarter of pharmaceutical preparations contain at least one active ingredient extracted from plant sources. Medical herbalists and naturopaths work with herbal remedies using the whole plant. Generally speaking, herbal remedies are safe but can sometimes cause side effects. These can include stomach upsets, sleeplessness and pains in your muscles or joints. Some herbal remedies may also interact with your prescribed medication.

One of the most beneficial herbs for OA is *Boswellia* (from the frankincense tree). Some clinical trials with this herb have shown to reduce pain and stiffness, and improve physical function in people with OA. Other herbs may be beneficial for arthritis, but the evidence is inconclusive (see page 12).

It is best to avoid self-prescribing and consult with a suitably qualified practitioner and to check with your doctor before starting the treatment to avoid any side effects and herb-drug interactions.

Manual therapies

There is a wide variety of manual therapies including acupuncture, chiropractic, massage and osteopathy. The latest research reviews demonstrate that some people with lower back pain can benefit from osteopathy, and massage therapy can be helpful for some people with fibromyalgia.

Tai chi and Yoga

Tai chi combines deep breathing and relaxation with slow and gentle movements. Originally developed as a martial art in 13th-century China, tai chi is today practised around the world as a health-promoting exercise. Some studies demonstrate that tai chi improved mood, quality of life, and overall physical function in people with OA and fibromyalgia.

Yoga incorporates several elements of exercise and breathing that may be beneficial for arthritis, and may help improve strength, flexibility and balance. Research has indicated that long-term yoga participants have significantly gained bone density, which can be attributed to the effects of muscles working against gravity. Some studies have shown beneficial effects for people with fibromyalgia.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques include muscle relaxation, refocusing, breathing control or visual imagery. Relaxation techniques are an important part of yoga and tai chi. Progressive muscle relaxation is used to help with muscle tension and cope with pain, while there's little evidence that it is effective in the treatment of RA and OA, there's promising evidence to suggest that it may be useful for fibromyalgia and low back pain.



Mindfulness meditation is becoming popular with mainstream health practitioners. It involves non-judgmental attention to experiences in the present moment. This technique can be beneficial for people with RA. Researchers have found that it helps to regulate emotions and improves people's ability to cope with pain. They noted that those with a history of depression responded better than others to mindfulness meditation.

Other popular complementary therapies and products with inconclusive evidence for arthritis

a) Promising but inconclusive evidence:

Herbal products that have some promising but inconclusive evidence for beneficial effects in OA include: Devil's claw, ginger extract, pine bark extract and rosehip extract.

Other products and therapies:

- Borage seed oil and Evening Primrose oil show some beneficial effect in RA.
- Green-lipped mussel extract is native to New Zealand. The evidence that this assists OA is mixed.
- Balneotherapy (mineral baths) in some studies have shown to be beneficial for RA and fibromyalgia.
- It is thought that cherries may have benefits for some arthritis that is inflammatory such as gout and rheumatoid arthritis. It has been suggested that antioxidant compounds found in cherries may inhibit the enzymes that increase inflammation. There is some evidence that uric acid may be lowered further by eating cherries in addition to taking uric acid lowering medicine.

b) Little evidence

Popular complementary treatments with very little evidence suggesting that these therapies might work in arthritis include: aromatherapy, biofeedback, chiropractic, hypnosis, magnetic therapy and Qigong. More research is needed to be able to assess long-term benefits of these treatments for people with arthritis.

Copper bracelets are widely used by people with arthritis but there is no scientific evidence to prove their beneficial effects.

Safety checklist

If you decide to try a complementary medicine treatment, the following checklist will help ensure your treatment is reliable and safe:

- Contact the professional association for your chosen therapy and ask for a list of members in your area.
- Be very cautious about any practitioner who advises you to abandon your conventional medical treatment.
- During the first visit ask your practitioner about their training, experience and qualifications.
- Ask your complementary therapist how this treatment or product works and whether they are safe.
- Ask how much the treatment will cost and how long it will take.
- Find out if they have indemnity insurance if something goes wrong.
- Ask your complementary medicine practitioner about any possible interactions of the product or therapy with your current medical treatment.

Key points:

- **Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer.** Find out and consider what scientific studies have been done on the safety and effectiveness of the complementary medicine treatment or product that interests you.
- Keep in mind that **“natural” does not necessarily mean “safe”**, be aware that some products may interact with medications (prescription or over-the-counter dietary supplements), and some may have side effects on their own.
- **Always tell your doctor** and your complementary medicine practitioner of all drugs, treatments and remedies you take.
- **Never stop taking prescribed medication without talking to your GP or specialist.**

Useful resources:

- Arthritis New Zealand – 0800 663 463 or www.arthritis.org.nz
- Arthritis Research UK – Report on complementary and alternative medicines – <http://tinyurl.com/compltherapy>
- ‘Gold standard’ of evidence – double-blind randomised control studies – www.cochrane.org
- National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine – <http://tinyurl.com/kuz4hcb>

Where to find registered complementary medicine practitioners:

- Massage New Zealand – www.masagenewzealand.org.nz
- New Zealand Association of Medical Herbalists – www.nzamh.org.nz
- New Zealand Register of Acupuncturists (NZRA) – www.acupuncture.org.nz
- New Zealand Society of Naturopaths – www.naturopath.org.nz
- New Zealand Qigong and Traditional Chinese Medicine Association – <http://tinyurl.com/qigongNZ>
- Certified Tai Chi instructors – <http://tinyurl.com/m225etu>
- Yoga Aotearoa, International Yoga association – www.iyta.org.nz

The information given in this brochure is not a medical advice. Before acting on any of the information contained in this brochure, or deciding on a course of treatment, you should discuss the matter with your GP or another medical professional.

Where can I learn more?

www.arthritis.org.nz

Regional offices

Northern (Auckland) 09 523 8900

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National office

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