

Information on homeopathy



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Homeopathy is a well-established and safe complementary therapy when practiced by a qualified therapist. It is offered to people with cancer for relief of the side effects of cancer and its treatments rather than as a cure. Medical research into homeopathy for people with cancer is still in its early stages. There are some promising results for inflammation of the mouth (stomatitis) and for the use of calendula for preventing dermatitis during radiotherapy. However, there is little evidence to suggest that homeopathy may help relieve menopausal symptoms adversely affected by cancer treatments. There is mixed or too little evidence to draw any other firm conclusions. Penny Brohn Cancer Care offers homeopathy for people with cancer as a safe and potentially beneficial complementary therapy for the symptoms and side effects of cancer and its treatments.

Practitioner Perspective

"Homeopathy is a gentle process that combines elements of the art and the science of healing. It involves both the consultation with the homeopath, and the remedy that you take. Homeopathy helps to stimulate the body's own healing ability and support lifestyle changes which help with energy care.

People often say afterwards "I feel better in myself"."

More information: What is homeopathy?

Homeopathy is a safe, gentle and widely-used therapy. It is based on the idea of "treating like with like". It was developed by the German physician Dr. Samuel Hahnemann who first published his ideas in 1790. He noticed that if a healthy person was given a medicine, the person would develop the symptoms of the

disease the medicine was supposed to treat. He concluded that by treating a disease with something that would cause the disease, you could cure it. He gave his theory the name "homeopathy" from the Greek words *homoion* (the same) and *pathos* (disease, suffering).

Hahnemann investigated the properties of different substances through "provings". He and a group of healthy volunteers took a full dose of the substance of interest and carefully recorded the symptoms it produced. From this he produced the *material medica*, a reference text which lists thousands of compounds matched against symptoms. The substances used include plants such as foxglove and poison ivy, minerals such as silica or sea salt and animal extracts such as snake venom and squid ink.

Hahnemann found that the medicinal properties of his preparations were maintained even at very small doses. He prepared these highly diluted doses with rhythmic shaking and striking to distil the vital healing essence of the preparation. This process is called potentisation. Remedies are given as a tiny white pill, a powder or a water-based liquid.

In 1810 Hahnemann published "The Organon of Rational Medicine". As his work continued, he revised the Organon with new information resulting in a total of six editions, the final one being published after his death in 1843. Homeopathy was brought to the UK in the 1830's by Dr F H F Quin¹. He met and travelled with Hahnemann in Europe, and became one of his key protégés. Homeopathy has maintained a strong following, with Hahnemann's work being taught and practiced by homeopaths across the world.

Today, homeopathy is practiced both by doctors who have qualified as homeopaths, known as "medical homeopaths", and by those who have trained exclusively in homeopathy to become professional, or "lay", homeopaths.

What happens in a homeopathy session?

In the first session, the homeopath will spend around an hour finding out about your health, past health, the health of immediate family, any likes or dislikes you have, your diet, emotions and mood. They will also make observations about things such as your breathing and complexion.

From this information the homeopath will select a remedy based on you as a whole, not just your symptoms. Homeopaths use reference texts and careful consideration to decide which remedy is most appropriate for you. For this reason, they may post the remedy to you rather than give it to you on the day.

You may need to take a remedy for only a few weeks. However, in some cases remedies can be taken for months or even years. During this time you may have shorter appointments with your homeopath less often, to monitor your progress. After time, your homeopath may decide a different remedy would suit you better.

What are the providers' claims?

Homeopathy does not claim to be a cure for cancer, but offers a gentle way of encouraging the body's own ability to heal. It can be used for the side effects of cancer and its treatments. It is also recommended for a wide range of other ailments such as arthritis, asthma, premenstrual syndrome, eczema, allergies and so on²⁻⁴.

No one is sure exactly how homeopathy works, and more research is needed. Hahnemann based his work on the scientific understanding of the time that health and disease were mediated through the body's "vital force"⁵. He theorised that his potentised remedies could stimulate the vital force to act against the disease, much as immunisation stimulates the immune system.

As scientific understanding grows, new theories about homeopathy are developing. Some homeopaths explain the actions of homeopathy with a new scientific theory that water may have a memory. This theory could explain how homeopathic remedies interact with the body and the vital force. However, there is scientific evidence both for and against^{6,7} it and the debate is ongoing.

What do people who have had homeopathy say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?"). We did not find any qualitative studies about homeopathy for people with cancer.

Are there any legal issues?

At present, homeopathy is not regulated by law. Homeopaths who are also healthcare professionals such as doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists, are represented by The Faculty of Homeopathy. The Society of Homeopaths is a register of lay homeopaths. It is in the process of forming an independent regulatory body and single register of lay homeopaths to bring together homeopaths from different schools under a common set of agreed standards. In the meantime, there are several reputable self-regulating organisations that train and certify homeopaths. Please see contact details at the end of this sheet. All qualified homeopaths will have undergone a minimum of three years study, training and assessment.

How much does it cost?

What's the evidence?

A recent high quality study⁸ looked at research about homeopathy for people with cancer. This study found that there is promising evidence for inflammation of the mouth (stomatitis) and for the use of calendula for preventing dermatitis during radiotherapy. These studies need to be repeated in order to confirm these findings. There is evidence from two studies that homeopathy is not effective for relieving menopausal symptoms brought about by cancer treatment. Evidence for other effects is not reliable and there is not enough evidence to draw any other conclusions. More research is needed.

Is homeopathy safe?

Homeopathy is considered a safe therapy^{3,8,9} when given by a qualified therapist who is experienced at working with people with cancer. There are very few reports of serious adverse effects of homeopathy.

It has been noticed that, for some people, homeopathic remedies can make less important symptoms worse as more serious symptoms get better. This is known as a "healing reaction" or "homeopathic aggravation" and is a recognised phase of the treatment¹⁰.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

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3. Society of Homeopaths. What is Homeopathy? [Monograph on the internet]. Accessed from <http://www.homeopathy-soh.org/about-homeopathy/> in June 2008
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8. Kassab S, Cummings M, Berkovitz S, van Haselen R, Fisher P. Homeopathic medicines for adverse effects of cancer treatments. Cochrane database of systematic reviews. 2009;2.
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Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

National organisations that represent the therapy:

- British Homeopathic Association and Faculty of Homeopathy. Tel: 0870 444 3950, web: www.trusthomeopathy.org/
- The Society of Homeopaths. Tel: 0845 450 6611, web: www.homeopathy-soh.org/

Statement

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If you have any questions please contact us

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