

Information on reflexology



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

In reflexology the thumb and fingers are used to press or pin point areas of the feet thought to be connected to organs, glands and other parts of the body. Reflexologists aim to treat many conditions, reduce stress and promote relaxation. People who have had reflexology report benefits such as relaxation and reduced anxiety. There is growing but not yet conclusive research evidence that reflexology can help reduce pain and anxiety associated with cancer and its treatments. There is mixed or too little evidence to come to a conclusion about how it helps other symptoms. Reflexology is considered safe when practiced by a trained therapist who has experience of treating people with cancer.

Practitioner Perspective

"We are very pleased to now be offering reflexology to our Cancerpoint clients here at Penny Brohn Cancer Care. In time we hope to expand this service to our residential courses too. Reflexology is an established touch therapy that involves using gentle specific pressure techniques to the feet and sometimes the hands. Using these simple techniques the whole body and being of the person can be helped and natural healing encouraged. The simplicity of only removing the socks for treatment is particularly welcome to those with cancer."

"At Penny Brohn Cancer Care we find that our clients who have reflexology notice that symptoms such as, pain, sleeplessness, nausea and constipation, are being helped and relieved. As well as symptomatic relief, people comment that reflexology is deeply calming and relaxing, giving a greater sense of wellbeing and emotional balance. There are some simple reflexology self-help techniques for the hand that our reflexologists can show people which can be very useful in between treatments to help with a range of difficulties, from pain and anxiety to hiccoughs."

Sarah Brown, Penny Brohn Cancer Care Reflexologist

More information: What is reflexology?

Reflexology is a modern Western therapy where pressure is applied to specific areas of the feet and sometimes the hands or ears. It is thought that these areas are linked to other parts of the body which will respond to the pressure. Reflexology aims to release tensions, relieve stress and illness and encourage healing.

There is anecdotal evidence which suggests that practices similar to reflexology were used in ancient Egypt, India and China¹. Modern reflexology stems from the "Zone Therapy" work of William Fitzgerald, an American ear, nose and throat specialist working in the early 20th century. He found that pressure applied to one area of the body relieved disease elsewhere and concluded that the body is mapped by 10 vertical "zones", each ending in a different part of the foot. Eunice Ingham, a nurse/physiotherapist, refined and revised this concept in the 1930s. She developed a map of the body's organs and glands on the foot and changed the name to "reflexology". Since then several schools of reflexology have emerged, including the original Ingham method and the Laura Norman method.

What happens in a reflexology session?

During the first session the reflexologist will ask you some questions about your medical history, lifestyle and health. The reflexologist will use this information to help decide which areas on your feet to treat. You will be asked to take off your shoes and socks and sit in a reclining chair, or lie on a treatment table so that the therapist can examine and treat your feet. Some therapists may look at and treat your hands as well.



The therapist will start by gently massaging your foot to aid relaxation. They then use their fingers and thumbs to apply pressure to specific points of the feet. Some therapists use oils or lotions to lubricate the skin, and may add aromatherapy oils. Pressure in some areas may feel sensitive or uncomfortable, but reflexology should not be painful – tell your therapists if you feel too uncomfortable. During the session or after the session you may feel sleepy or very relaxed.

Reflexology sessions are usually 30 minutes to an hour long, and a course of treatment normally lasts for six to eight sessions, though this may be extended.

What are the providers' claims?

Practitioners offer reflexology to treat a wide range of health symptoms as well as to promote overall good health. General aims are to reduce stress, increase relaxation, improve circulation, cleanse toxins, balance the whole system and revitalise energy². Conditions that are thought to benefit include, amongst others, postmenopausal symptoms, sinusitis, asthma, arthritis, back pain, chronic fatigue, digestive disorders, insomnia, migraine, headaches and stress-related problems³.

For people with cancer, reflexology is offered to aid relaxation and reduce anxiety. Reflexology is also thought to relieve pain and sickness caused by cancer and its treatment, improve wellbeing and support the immune system.

Unproven theories about 'how reflexology works' are various and include:

- **Clearing blockages in the life force energy.** Qi is the theory of energy flow used in Chinese medicine and this theory is adopted by some reflexologists. Blockages in the flow of Qi are thought to reflect disease.
- **Stimulation of the release of endorphins** (natural pain killers) to relieve pain
- **Stimulation of lymphatic flow** – lymph is an important part of the immune and circulatory systems of the body; touch and massage may improve lymphatic flow.
- **Disintegration of uric acid crystals** – felt as grittiness in the feet.
- **The central nervous system** – stimulation of biological reflexes between the feet and the internal organs to promote healing
- **Gating control theory** – by reducing stress the perception of pain can be eased.

These theories are not supported by reliable scientific evidence⁴. Debate and research are ongoing.

What do people who have had reflexology 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.

There are three studies of reasonable quality like this. All report that people have positive experiences with reflexology. People in these studies reported psychological benefits such as relaxation, and reduced tension and anxiety. In one study people reported an improvement in physical symptoms, but the other two studies did not find this to be true for most respondents. One study compared reflexology to foot massage and found that people had similar experiences with both.

All of the studies in this section can be criticised for the quality of the methods they used. However, they are still useful to help understand what having reflexology can be like.

Are there any legal issues?

There are currently no laws to govern reflexology. However, there are a number of trustworthy organisations who certify reflexologists and who support voluntary regulation. Ideally, try to find a reflexologist who has experience of or training in working with people who are living with cancer.

How much does it cost?

Sessions can cost between £25 to £60 per hour⁵. Some hospitals and cancer care centres offer reflexology free of charge, or at a reduced cost.

What's the evidence?

Some research studies look at whether reflexology works when compared with a group that does not have reflexology. These are called randomised controlled trials. There are seven studies like this. Five of these studies are summarised in a review which concludes that there is too little information to reach a clear conclusion, as the studies are not similar enough, or have not been done well.

Since this review was written two further studies have been published. Both of these show positive results for reflexology in reducing cancer-related pain and anxiety.

Taking all these studies into account, there is a growing but not yet conclusive evidence to support reflexology as being effective in reducing pain and anxiety related to cancer immediately after a reflexology treatment, though it is unclear if this relief lasts more than an hour or so. There is mixed or too little information to make a clear conclusion about other benefits including quality of life and reduction in symptoms. Better research with larger numbers of people is needed to confirm current results. A full list of reference used to write this section is available upon request.

Is reflexology safe?

If practiced by a qualified and appropriately experienced reflexologist, reflexology is considered to be safe³. Very few side effects or problems associated with reflexology have been reported. A few people experience mild side effects such as allergy to lubricants, fatigue, needing the toilet more often, light-headedness, tender feet or flu-like symptoms^{3,5}.

Reflexology is not recommended if you have recent or persistent foot injuries, wounds, ulcers, gout, or vascular disease of the feet/legs^{3,4}. If the site of your cancer is on your foot or leg, reflexology may not be appropriate. Let your reflexologist know about any medical condition you have before you start.

Resources used

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

1. Issel C. Reflexology: art, science and history. 1990. New Frontier Publishing, Sacramento.
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3. Ernst E, Pittler MH, Wider B. The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. An evidence-based approach. 2006. Mosby Elsevier Ltd.
4. Natural Standard. Reflexology. [Monograph on the internet]. [Cited 18/3/2009]. www.naturalstandard.com
5. Pinder M, Pedro L, Theodorou G, and Treacy K. Complementary Healthcare: a guide for patients. [Report on the internet]. The Prince of Wales's Foundation for Integrated health. London, England. [Cited 1/04/2009]: www.fih.org.uk/information_library/complementary_healthcare_a_guide/index.html
6. Cancer Research UK. Reflexology. [Monograph on the internet]. [Cited 18/3/09]. www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=254
7. American Cancer Society. Reflexology. [Monograph on the internet]. [Cited 18/03/09]. www.cancer.org
8. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database. Reflexology. [Monograph on the internet]. [Cited 18/03/09]. www.naturaldatabase.com

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:

- The Association of Reflexologists. Tel: 01823 351010, web: www.aor.org.uk

Contact us

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