

Information on relaxation



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

Relaxation therapy aims to release tensions and produce a state of deep rest and relaxation. Relaxation exercises usually take place lying down, and involve listening to instructions given by a therapist, or recordings on CD/tape. Studies have shown that it is an effective complementary therapy for people with cancer, helping to reduce nausea, pain, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure and stress. It is often offered to help relieve sleep problems, and promote wellbeing. It is considered safe and effective before, during and after treatment.

Practitioner Perspective

"At Penny Brohn Cancer Care we have found that the ability to relax is the ground stone to many approaches of healing and health. We also know that many people find it difficult to relax, particularly at times of stress and disruption such as those following a cancer diagnosis. We have developed a range of tried and tested ways to help people to unwind, de-stress, give themselves permission to let go and allow their bodies to increasingly relax. Many people are surprised by how easy it is to relax when guided through the process and by the power of the effects of simply relaxing physically. At Penny Brohn Cancer Care we are aware that it is not necessarily easy to integrate ways of relaxing regularly into our lives, and we offer support to enable this process."

More information: What is relaxation therapy?

Relaxation is the process whereby the body and mind let go of accumulated tension to produce a state of deep rest. Relaxation helps to relieve muscular tension and to switch from the "fight or flight" stress response to the more restful "relaxation response", which is characterised by feelings of wellbeing and pleasure.

For people with cancer relaxation techniques are thought to be highly beneficial in terms of aiding with side effects of treatment and symptoms of the disease. Potential benefits of relaxation include: reduced pain, nausea, depression and anxiety.

What happens in a relaxation therapy session?

Relaxation therapy may take place in group sessions, one-to-one with a therapist, or alone listening to CDs/tapes of relaxation exercise instructions. In general, relaxation exercises are mostly practiced lying down usually involve the releasing of tension in the muscles.

Example of a simple relaxation technique, known as progressive muscle relaxation:
"Find a comfortable place to sit or ideally lie down. Close your eyes and take a few gentle breaths, consciously letting any tensions unwind that you are aware of with the out-breath. You might want to breathe audibly or sigh since this enhances the release. Then relax your muscles gradually and progressively as you move your way up through the body by first tensing and then relaxing them one by one. You might want to start with the feet, legs and buttocks, then work your way up your back and front of the torso, arms and hands and finish with the shoulders, neck, face and skull."

What are the providers' claims?

It is thought that relaxation can be particularly helpful for people with cancer before, during and after cancer treatments; such as when experiencing pain or discomfort or sleep problems. Relaxation may also enhance the effects of imagery or meditation exercises. Overall, relaxation therapy is thought to positively influence health and wellbeing, off-setting the damaging effects of chronic stress and tension. It is believed to aid with side effects of cancer treatment and symptoms of the disease. Relaxation therapy is not thought to be a cure for cancer, however, it is thought to provide the body with the optimum environment for health and healing.

How much does it cost?

Relaxation therapy may be conducted in a support group which may meet for free. One-to-one appointments with therapists may vary in price. Relaxation CDs for use at home cost around £15 (stocked by Penny Brohn Cancer Care's Shop@pennybrohn).

What's the evidence?

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

There is an increasing body of supportive evidence from scientific studies of the effect of relaxation on the health and wellbeing of people with cancer. In 2001 one study pooled together all research looking at the effects of relaxation¹. This study concluded that relaxation therapy should be given as routine for cancer patients undergoing medical treatment (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, bone marrow transplants) as it aided with the reduction of nausea, pain, anxiety, depression and high blood pressure. Overall, it made the experience of cancer treatment less stressful, therefore reducing potential side-effects. More recent studies have also found beneficial effects of relaxation therapy for people with cancer before surgery²⁻⁴; during chemotherapy⁵⁻⁸, radiotherapy⁹ and in the long term, after treatment¹⁰⁻¹².

Is relaxation safe?

There are no known adverse effects associated with relaxation therapy. However, one should avoid driving/operating machinery whilst listening to relaxation CDs. Also, relaxation exercises may not be suitable for those with schizophrenia or psychotic disorders¹³.

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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12. Bindemann S, Soukop M, Kaye S B. Randomized controlled study of relaxation training. *Eur J Cancer* 1991;27:170-174
13. The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. Second Edition. Ernst E, Pittler M H, Wider B (Eds). 2006. Mosby, Elsevier

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

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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