

Information on Shiatsu



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

Shiatsu is an Asian body work therapy from Japan that uses the principles of acupressure. This is where the practitioner applies pressure to points around the body to release blocks in the flow of energy (Ki, Qi) through the meridians (energy pathways) of the body. Shiatsu is offered to people with cancer to enhance wellbeing and mood, and to reduce stress, anxiety, pain, nausea and vomiting. People who have had shiatsu report enhanced wellbeing and better symptom control. A high quality systematic review of other related Asian bodywork therapies suggests Shiatsu can reduce nausea and vomiting. Shiatsu has also been shown to reduce anxiety in a small study. Shiatsu is safe for people with cancer if practiced by a suitably qualified and experienced practitioner.

Practitioner Perspective:

"At Penny Brohn Cancer Care we appreciate that life can sometimes appear too complicated and may seem overwhelming. We use Shiatsu to encourage clients to connect more directly with themselves and how they truly feel. The quality of touch and stillness helps clients to acknowledge their emotional or physical pain returning them to a place of simplicity and space. As well as clients feeling deeply relaxed and peaceful, their symptoms and side effects may be relieved and a sense of hope restored. During these times there is a great potential for insight and transformation."

Simon Givertz, Penny Brohn Cancer Care Shiatsu therapist

More information: What is Shiatsu?

In Japanese Shiatsu means finger (*shi*) pressure (*atsu*). Shiatsu has its roots in ancient Japanese massage techniques and involves finger pressure, palm pressure,

massage, stretching and other manual techniques targeted at “acupoints” on the body. Shiatsu is similar to acupuncture in that it stimulates acupoints lying along the body’s network of energy pathways (or meridians). However, it uses manual pressure rather than the needles used in acupuncture. The concept behind Shiatsu is that energy, referred to as Ki or Qi (pronounced “chi”) should flow freely around the body along pathways known as meridians. If this flow is blocked, disease may occur. Shiatsu aims to unblock the flow of chi around the body by stimulating the acupoints.

Shiatsu was developed from the ancient Japanese technique of Tui Na in the early twentieth century and was first introduced to the west in the 1970s. It falls within a wider category of “Asian body work” techniques which use the acupressure points to manipulate the flow of Qi around the body. There are a number of branches and new forms of Asian body work and shiatsu which incorporate other techniques such as breathing, meditation and stretching. Some examples include:

- **Acupressure** – a manual form of acupuncture
- **Tui Na** – dating back 4000 years, from which modern shiatsu is derived. Very similar to Shiatsu, but using massage-like manipulation of soft tissue in addition to acupoints. Tui Na massage is also used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)
- **Ohashiatsu** – formulated by Ohashi in the 1970’s, shiatsu with the addition of exercise and meditation
- **Watsu** – developed in the 1980’s, watsu is shiatsu practiced in warm water to support the joints and aid relaxation

What happens in a Shiatsu session?

A shiatsu session is usually an hour in length. For the first visit the shiatsu therapist will ask questions about medical history, health, diet and lifestyle. Treatment is generally carried out on a futon-style mattress which is low down on the floor. If clients cannot lie down then shiatsu can be practiced sitting up. Clients keep their clothes on throughout the session and are advised to wear loose-fitting comfortable clothes. During the session therapists may apply pressure to the body using their thumbs, palms, fingers, knees, elbows and feet. At the end of a session clients are advised to drink water and relax for a while before returning to normal activities.

What are the providers’ claims?

The central concept of Shiatsu is to enable energy to flow around the body more easily, which is thought to lead to whole body effects such as improved blood circulation, endorphin release and elimination of toxins. Shiatsu is therefore offered to treat a wide variety of conditions including depression, back and joint pain, digestive problems, sports injuries, headaches, migraines, whiplash, asthma and the later stages of pregnancy and childbirth¹.

For people with cancer Shiatsu is offered for pain relief, nausea, depression, anxiety, stress, poor appetite and insomnia. In general shiatsu is thought to enhance wellbeing and so to help people with cancer cope more easily with the side effects of cancer and its treatments.

What do people who have had Shiatsu say about it?

One descriptive (qualitative) study looked at shiatsu offered through a palliative day care centre. Some of the participants were people with cancer. Participants were asked to describe the effects of shiatsu. Overall, people were very positive reporting increases in energy levels, better relaxation, increased feelings of confidence, better

symptom control, better mobility, improved clarity of thought and a restoration of wellbeing. Some participants reported minor negative effects such as brief pain during the session. The researchers concluded that shiatsu can be a valuable treatment to help those in palliative care "claim back their life" and manage the symptoms of their disease. This study gives a very good insight into the experience of shiatsu for a small number of people, but more research would be needed to see if these results represent the general population.

Are there any legal issues?

Shiatsu in the UK is not centrally regulated, and practitioners are not required by law to hold any qualification. However, a number of professional organisations offer training and accreditation, and the General Shiatsu Council (for contact details see below) is working towards a common set of standards for training and regulation of shiatsu therapists.

How much does it cost?

Shiatsu therapy can cost between £25 - £60 per hour. Some UK hospitals and cancer care centres offer shiatsu free of charge or at a very low rate. Eg Cancerpoint at Penny Brohn Cancer Care.

What is the evidence?

In comparison to other complementary therapies Shiatsu is poorly researched. There are no Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and only one very small controlled clinical trial of nine people, which concluded that whilst physical symptoms were not reduced significantly in this trial, it did greatly reduce anxiety levels.

More research has been done in the wider field of Asian body work. A high quality Cochrane review of RCTs found that stimulation of the P6 point on the wrist helped relieve nausea and vomiting. Also, a very recent Cochrane review has found some weak, but positive results for the use of acupuncture for relieving breathlessness in advanced stages of cancer. However, this research is not an investigation of Shiatsu as a whole and clearly more research is needed before a conclusion can be reached.

Is Shiatsu safe?

If practiced by a suitably trained therapist who is experienced at working with people with cancer, Shiatsu is considered to be safe. Those with the following conditions are advised to check with their GP before receiving Shiatsu: Low platelet count, osteoporosis, fever, or those in the first three months of pregnancy.

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. Natural Standard [monograph on the internet]. Acupuncture, Shiatsu, Tuina. Accessed 15/06/2007 from (subscription required): <http://www.naturalstandard.com/monographs/alternativemodalities/intelihealth-shiatsu.asp>
2. Cancer Research UK [monograph on the internet]. Shiatsu. Accessed 15/06/2007 from http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default_printer_friend.asp?page=255

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:

- General Shiatsu Council Email: info@generalshiatsucouncil.org From here you can find links to reputable organisations who certify shiatsu therapists.

Contact us

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