



Complementary and alternative therapies

Explains what complementary and alternative therapies are, how they are used, and where to find out more.

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About complementary and alternative therapies

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What are they?

Complementary and alternative therapies typically take a holistic approach to your physical and mental health. This means that they consider all aspects of your physical and emotional wellbeing as a whole, rather than treating particular symptoms separately. For example, some complementary therapies focus on the mind, body and spirit or on the flow of energy through your body.

Many of these approaches have roots in ancient Eastern philosophies of health, or the kinds of traditional healing methods used widely before the development of the treatment models currently used by the NHS. By contrast, NHS treatment models are largely

based on clinical evidence and academic research (sometimes called 'modern medicine' or 'conventional medicine').

What's the difference between a 'complementary' and an 'alternative' therapy?

In general:

- 'Complementary' describes therapies which may be used alongside treatments offered by your doctor (such as yoga, massage and meditation).
- 'Alternative' describes approaches which are generally meant to replace the treatments offered by your doctor (such as [Traditional Chinese medicine](#) or [Ayurvedic medicine](#), or some herbal remedies such as [St John's wort](#)).

Some people may use either of these terms to broadly describe any kind of treatment that isn't available through the NHS.

(See our page on [types of complementary and alternative therapies](#) for more information about the different therapies available.)

Why might I try them?

There are many reasons you might decide to try complementary or alternative therapies. For example:

- You don't want the treatment your doctor has offered (such as [psychiatric medication](#) or [talking therapies](#)).
- You've already tried the treatments your doctor has offered and they haven't suited you (for example, you haven't found a psychiatric medication that works, or it's caused unwanted side effects).
- You're on an NHS waiting list for treatment, but you need help to manage your symptoms right away.
- You want more options to try in addition to the treatments your doctor has offered.
- You don't agree with your doctor's approach and you want to take another approach to looking after your mental health.

Whatever your situation, if you have any worries about your mental health you can [seek advice from your GP](#), and talk through all your options through with someone you trust.

When I could no longer take SSRI antidepressants due to side effects, I tried St John's wort as an alternative. It has definitely helped with my depression and my mood has lifted quite a lot.

Can they treat mental health problems?

Complementary and alternative therapies can be used as a treatment for both physical and mental health problems. The particular problems that they can help will depend on the specific therapy that you are interested in, but many can help to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety. Some people also find they can help with sleep problems, relaxation and feelings of stress.

I have used massage therapy to help relieve some of the muscle tension and pain that my anxiety creates. Just having someone respond to me and my body with compassion helps me treat myself more compassionately and with more respect.

Do they work?

As with all medicines and therapies, different things work for different people, and it's not easy to predict which therapy you would find most useful or effective.

Most of the evidence for complementary and alternative therapies is based on traditional use rather than modern scientific studies. This means it's really difficult to know whether they are an effective treatment for mental health problems. However, many people do say they find them helpful in managing or relieving the symptoms they experience.

For information about the evidence behind specific therapies, see our pages on [types of therapies](#) and [herbal remedies](#).

Can I get them through the NHS?

Complementary and alternative therapies are not typically available through the NHS as a treatment for mental health problems. This is because they aren't typically recommended as evidence-based treatment options by the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#) – the organisation that produces guidelines on best practice in healthcare.

To find out what the NHS is able to offer you locally, it's a good idea to make a GP appointment and ask your doctor directly.

Are they safe?

Most complementary and alternative therapies are considered to be safe when conducted by a trained and experienced practitioner.

However, there may be times when a certain therapy may carry higher risks for you, and would not be recommended. For example, if:

- you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- you are receiving any other treatments that could interfere with the therapy.
- you have a physical or mental health problem that could be made worse by the therapy.

Before you start any new treatment it is a good idea to **talk through any safety concerns with your doctor and the treatment provider**. This is especially important if you're already taking any kind of medication.

If you are considering taking a herbal remedy, see our information on [when herbal remedies might be unsuitable for you](#). Remember that your local pharmacist can also give you advice about prescription and over-the-counter medications.

How are they regulated?

There's no compulsory regulation for complementary healthcare practitioners in England and Wales, so it is possible to practice totally independently without regulation.

However, there are several kinds of voluntary organisation with which practitioners can choose to register:

- The [Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#). The CNHC acts as a voluntary regulator for the sector. It publishes a list of registered therapies, and maintains a public register of practitioners who have signed up.
- **Professional associations for particular [types of therapies](#)**. These are membership organisations which provide a range of benefits and services for practitioners, and act in the interests of the profession. Most have their own codes of practice and registers of practitioners.

It's always a good idea to choose a therapist who is registered with a regulatory body or professional association. This means that they will have met the standards of practice and education required by that organisation.

For guidance on the regulation of herbal medicines, see our information on [how herbal remedies are licensed](#).

What else should I consider before starting a therapy?

Only you can decide whether a type of treatment feels right for you. But it might help you to think about:

- What do I want to get out of it – is it realistic?
- What does it cost – can I afford it?
- How long will it take – have I got enough time? Is it open-ended or time-limited?
- Will I have to travel?
- Have I got any health problems that would affect me being able to do the therapy?
- Am I receiving any other treatments that would affect me being able to do the therapy?
- Could this therapy be adapted to meet my needs?
- Would someone I trust be able to come along with me if I didn't feel comfortable going on my own?

Finding the right therapist

As with any kind of therapy, it's really important to find someone you feel confident and safe with. Regardless of the kind of therapy or medicine they practice, if you don't like or trust that person you're less likely to have a positive experience.

As a good starting point, your practitioner should be able to give you straightforward answers to your questions about:

- what qualifications they have
- what professional bodies they're registered with

- their past experience of using the therapy for your specific problem
- what risks might be involved, and what you should do if you experience any negative effects
- what procedures they have in place for making a complaint
- any other concerns or questions you have about the therapy.

If you don't feel able to ask these questions of them beforehand it might help to write them down in an email, or ask someone you trust to come along to support you.

Where can I access them?

To find a registered therapist you can:

- use the search tool on the [Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council website](#)
- look for a list of practitioners through an organisation who specialises in the particular therapy. You can find links to these organisations on our page on [types of complementary and alternative therapy](#).

You may also find a recommendation for a local therapist through:

- alternative therapy centres
- health spas
- your [local Mind branch](#)
- your GP practice
- your local community centre.

What if they don't work for me?

Although some people find that complementary or alternative therapies can be helpful, not everyone does. If you've tried something and it hasn't helped, **it's important not to blame yourself**. Managing a mental health problem can be really difficult, especially when you're not feeling well. It can take time and may not be straightforward. But many people find that when they find the right combination of treatments, self-care and support, it is possible to feel better.

See our pages on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) for other options you could explore.

About herbal remedies

- [What are herbal remedies?](#)
- [What can they treat and do they work?](#)
- [How are they different from psychiatric drugs?](#)
- [When might they be unsuitable for me?](#)
- [How are they licensed?](#)
- [How can I find a herbal practitioner?](#)

What are herbal remedies?

Herbal remedies are substances derived from plants, which are used as a way of treating and preventing different health problems. They can come in various forms such as capsules, teas, liquid drops or skin creams.

Some may be referred to as 'supplements', typically meaning products which aim to boost your health and wellbeing in some way (such as drinking camomile tea to promote good sleep). Others may be referred to as 'medicines', typically meaning products which aim to treat, cure or prevent a diagnosed health problem (such as using [St John's wort](#) to treat [depression](#) instead of prescription [antidepressants](#)).

Often herbal remedies are part of alternative therapeutic approaches to healthcare, such as [Ayurvedic medicine](#), [Traditional Chinese medicine \(TCM\)](#) and [Western herbal medicine](#).

What can they treat and how do they work?

The Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) publish detailed, reliable information on which herbal remedies are used for different mental health problems, how each remedy works, how effective it is, what side effects it can cause, and what drugs they can interact with. [You can read this information on the RCPsych website.](#)

For detailed information on St John's wort, see our pages on [St John's wort](#).

How are they different from psychiatric drugs?

Unlike [psychiatric medication](#), most herbal remedies are:

- based on long-standing traditional use (not based on scientific research studies using clinical trials)
- available to buy over-the-counter without a doctor's prescription
- not typically offered by NHS doctors (because there is not enough reliable evidence that they are effective at treating mental health problems)
- [licensed under a different scheme](#)
- occasionally [prepared bespoke for you](#) by a [herbal practitioner](#).

Are they safer or easier to take than psychiatric drugs?

Some people assume that herbal remedies must be safer than psychiatric drugs, or less likely to cause side effects. But this is not necessarily true.

Herbal remedies can cause side effects, and they can interact with other drugs – just as prescription drugs can.

You should approach any kind of supplement or medication with equal caution (prescription and non-prescription), and make sure you have all the information you need to feel confident about your decision. If you are in any doubt about whether any medication (including a herbal remedy) is safe for you to take, **seek advice from your GP or local pharmacist.**

When might they be unsuitable for me?

Although herbal remedies are easily available to buy without a prescription, **some may not be suitable for you, or could be harmful.** For example if you:

- are pregnant or breastfeeding
- are taking any other medications, as they may interact badly (for example, you should never take [St John's wort](#) at the same time as any prescription [antidepressant](#), as this increases the risk of dangerous side effects)
- have another physical or mental health problem which could be made worse by taking a herbal remedy
- take too much, or don't take them as instructed on the packaging
- are due to have surgery (some herbal remedies can interfere with anaesthetic)
- are buying your medication online – there are risks that the product could be fake, unlicensed or contaminated
- take a remedy that is [not licensed](#). For example, there is some evidence that some unlicensed [Traditional Chinese](#) and [Ayurvedic](#) herbal medicines contain toxic levels of metals such as mercury and lead.

Bespoke herbal preparations

After holding a consultation with you, a [herbal practitioner](#) may make you their own herbal preparation to take. Typically these are made from different parts of plants, minerals and sometimes metals – but because **these preparations are [not licensed](#)** it's not possible to be sure what's in them, or in what dose.

It is important to discuss any concerns with your doctor, pharmacist or [herbal practitioner](#). You might ask:

- what is in the preparation
- how it might make you feel
- what side effects you should expect
- what you should do if you experience side effects that you were not told about.

For more guidance see our pages on:

- [what to know before taking medication](#)
- [receiving the right medication for you](#)
- [coping with side effects](#)
- [the Yellow Card scheme](#) (for how to report side effects from any medication, including herbal remedies).

[The NHS Choices page on herbal medicines](#) also has more information.

How are they licensed?

Most herbal products sold in supermarkets, pharmacists and health shops in the UK are licensed by the [Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency \(MHRA\)](#) – the same organisation that licenses other kinds of drugs, including [psychiatric medications](#). But herbal remedies come under the **Traditional Herbal Medicines Registration scheme**.

Under this scheme, registration is based on the long-standing use of a plant as a traditional herbal medicine – not based on clinical trials, as prescription drugs are.

Licensed herbal products should be marked with the registration mark shown here:



This indicates that the herbal medicine is safe to an acceptable standard, provided it is used according to the instructions on the packaging. The product should also have a registration number, starting with the letters 'THR'.

[Bespoke herbal remedies prepared by herbal practitioners](#) are not licenced.

How can I find a herbal practitioner?

Herbal practitioners play an established role in [Western herbal medicine](#), [Traditional Chinese medicine \(TCM\)](#) and [Ayurvedic medicine](#). But currently there are no rules around who can call themselves a herbal practitioner – you can practice without having any related experience or qualifications.

However, there are a number of voluntary registers which require certain standards of practice and education. So if you want to find a herbal practitioner, it's a good idea to find someone through one of these registers:

- [The National Institute of Medical Herbalists](#)
- [The British Herbal Medicine Association](#)
- [The Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine](#)
- [The Ayurvedic Professionals Association](#)

List of therapies

In this section you'll find information about:

- [Acupuncture](#)
- [Aromatherapy](#)
- [Ayurvedic medicine](#)
- [Bowen technique](#)
- [Homeopathy](#)
- [Hypnotherapy](#)

- [Massage](#)
- [Meditation](#)

- [Mindfulness](#)
- [Reiki](#)
- [Traditional Chinese medicine \(TCM\)](#)
- [Western herbal medicine](#)
- [Yoga](#)

If you want to learn about a therapy that isn't listed here, it might help to ask your doctor if they have any information on that particular type of therapy, and if it might be right for you.

Safety information

Most complementary and alternative therapies are considered to be safe when conducted by a trained and experienced practitioner. However, there may be times that a certain therapy may carry higher risks for you. See our information on safety, when a [herbal remedy might be unsuitable for you](#), and [things to consider before starting a therapy](#).

I find that meditating has so much misinformation around it. I just like to unwind by turning everything off, closing my eyes and trying to focus on my breathing, slowly removing the negative energy and thoughts from my day.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture involves inserting very fine needles in to different parts of your body (called acupuncture points). This is believed to stimulate nerves and muscles which may release natural pain-relieving chemicals.

It's based on the belief that health problems can be caused when energy (or your 'Qi') becomes 'blocked'. Acupuncture aims to unlock your energy channels to restore the flow of your Qi.

Acupuncture is mainly used for headaches or chronic pain, but some people feel it helps to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Find out more from:

- [NHS Choices](#)
- [The British Medical Acupuncture Society](#)
- [The British Acupuncture Council](#)

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils (oils extracted from plants) for healing. Some people find that the smell (aroma) of particular oils helps them to relax, sleep better, relieve pain and improve low mood. For example, when used appropriately lavender and camomile essential oils are thought to be relaxing and help you sleep.

The oils can be used in many different ways, such as in creams, oil burners, massaged in to the skin or by adding drops to a warm bath.

It is possible to experience allergies or reactions to the oils, so you should speak to an aromatherapist beforehand if you have any concerns.

Find out more from:

[The Aromatherapy Council](#)

Ayurvedic medicine

This is based on ancient Indian theory and uses medicines made from plants and minerals to restore balance in the body. Ayurvedic medicine also includes massage and panchakarma (therapies that aim to get rid of the toxins in the body using massage and herbal oils).

Find out more from:

- [The Ayurvedic Professionals Association](#)

Bowen technique

The Bowen technique (named after Thomas Bowen who developed the therapy) is a kind of contact therapy, meaning the practitioner does touch you, but it is a very light touch which can be done through light clothing. They use very gentle rolling motions with pauses in between.

It's mainly used for physical problems, but some people find it reduces feelings of depression, anxiety and stress.

Find out more from:

- [The Bowen Therapy Professional Association](#)

Homeopathy

Homeopathy involves using extremely diluted (watered down) natural substances to treat physical and mental health problems. Homeopaths believe that the more a substance is diluted, the more effective it will be – and the less likely it will be to cause any unwanted side effects.

Some people find that trying homeopathic remedies for stress, anxiety and depression does make them feel better.

However, most doctors are sceptical about homeopathy. The NHS says that the evidence shows homeopathy works no better than a placebo (a sugar pill). It also cautions that choosing homeopathy as your main treatment may mean you don't choose other options, which could work better.

Find out more from:

- [NHS Choices](#)
- [The Society of Homeopaths](#)

Meditation

There are various different schools of mediation, but all aim to quieten your mind and put you into a state of calm, stillness and rest. Some types of meditation may also involve [mindfulness](#).

While the evidence is mixed as to whether meditation is effective at treating mental health problems, many people do find it a helpful way of relaxing and managing feelings of stress and anxiety.

There are many DVDs, apps, and free online videos that can teach you meditation exercises.

Find out more from:

- [The School of Meditation](#)
- [NHS Choices' bedtime meditation video](#)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves focusing your attention to what's happening in the present moment. It aims to help you become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, so you can choose how to react to them calmly.

Many people find mindfulness helpful for managing negative thoughts and feelings of stress.

Find out more from:

- our pages on [mindfulness](#)
- [NHS Choices](#)

Mindfulness helps me manage when my brain decides that a dozen ideas at once is the best way to work. It's not a 'cure all' for me, and I have to work at it, but it is a key part of my coping strategy now.

Reflexology

Reflexology is based on the idea that different points on your feet, hands, face and ears are linked to other parts of your body through your nervous system. During a typical session, a reflexologist will use their hands to apply gentle pressure to these points.

Reflexologists recommend this treatment as a way to relieve tension, improve mood and help you to sleep.

Find out more from:

- [The Association of Reflexologists](#)
- [The British Reflexology Association](#)

Reiki

Reiki is a Japanese technique which involves the 'laying of hands' on different areas of the body including the head, shoulders, stomach and feet. It's based on the idea that we have a 'life force energy' that flows within our bodies. When this energy is low, it makes us more likely to become unwell.

A Reiki treatment aims to restore life force energy to help you to heal and stay well. Some people find it makes them feel more relaxed and less stressed.

Find out more from:

- [The UK Reiki Federation](#)

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)

TCM aims to rebalance the body's energy systems, and involves acupuncture and tuina (a form of massage) as well as [herbal remedies](#).

It has been the main medical system used in China for more than 2000 years.

Find out more from:

- [The Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine](#)

Hypnotherapy

Hypnosis involves putting you in a state of deep relaxation to access subconscious beliefs, thoughts and memories which may affect the way you act.

Hypnotherapists use hypnosis to help you change unwanted thoughts and behaviours by using suggestion and increasing your self-awareness. You're always in full control under hypnosis, and your therapist will only use methods that you've agreed on and feel comfortable with.

Many people find it a useful way of treating things like [depression](#), [anxiety](#), [phobias](#), [stress](#), [anger](#), [addictions](#) and [low self-esteem](#). But hypnotherapy might not be suitable for you if you have a diagnosis of [personality disorder](#) (it may make your symptoms worse), or if you are [due to be a witness at a trial](#).

Find out more from:

- [NHS Choices](#)
- [The Hypnotherapy Directory](#)

Hypnotherapy is less obtrusive than one would expect and is definitely NOT like the comedy hypnosis we often see on the television. It has helped me to identify areas in my life which have impacted on my mental health and has enabled me to deal with them.

Massage

Massage uses touch in a sensitive and respectful way, taking account of physical symptoms, wellbeing, and your lifestyle. There are lots of different types of massage therapy, such as Shiatsu, Indian head massage and [aromatherapy](#) massage.

Find out more from:

- [The National Association of Massage and Manipulative Therapists](#)
- [the Therapy Directory](#)

Western herbal medicine

These can be used to treat health problems in a similar manner to prescription medications, but the herbal practitioner will usually take a holistic, rather than an illness-focused, approach.

Find out more from:

- [The British Herbal Medicine Association](#)
- [The National Institute of Medical Herbalists](#)

Yoga

Yoga involves spiritual and physical practices designed to increase self-awareness, such as posture work, breathing exercises, [meditation](#), sounds and visualisation.

There are many different types of yoga, such as Hatha (moving through postures to create balance), Bikram (done in a hot room) and Iyengar (using blocks and straps to support yoga moves).

Many studies suggest that yoga can be helpful in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

It's a good idea to do at least a few classes with a professional instructor (in group or individually) before trying it by yourself, because doing the poses incorrectly can cause injuries.

But once you feel safe and confident, there are many books, DVDs and free online resources available to guide you on more cheaply.

Find out more from:

- [The British Wheel of Yoga](#)
- [NHS Choices](#) (has a [free yoga video](#))
- local leisure centres and health clubs

Yoga has helped me to practice some of the controlled breathing that my nurses and doctors had encouraged me to learn. Being introduced to some of the cultural beliefs of non-violence that influence yogic practice also helped me to start treating myself in a less judgemental and more compassionate way.

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.
 - Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, info@mind
 - Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, legal@mind
 - Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, bluelightinfo@mind
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

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References are available on request.