

*This factsheet looks at a number of complementary therapies that you may find helpful. These therapies are not meant to replace treatment with anti-epileptic medication.*

Complementary therapies can help to promote well-being and underlying health as well as reduce stress. There are a very wide range of natural and complementary therapies, and a few of them could increase your chance of having seizures. So it's important to be well informed before you start. To ensure treatments are suitable, always use a qualified therapist and let them know as much as you can about your epilepsy, your seizures, other conditions you may have and any medication that you take.

Some therapies are covered by statutory regulation, such as chiropractors and osteopaths. Some complementary therapies, such as homeopathy, are long-established and have their own professional councils that hold their members to high standards of training, practise and ethics.

Some less well-established therapies have little or no regulation at all. It is not always easy to establish the credentials of a complementary therapist as regulation is not as well developed as in other areas of healthcare. This makes it hard for the public to distinguish between an experienced, responsible practitioner and someone who has little training.

It is always worth looking to see whether the complementary therapy you are interested in has a professional body and check its standards and register of members. A personal recommendation of a highly regarded practitioner can be reassuring, and is a very good place to start. But it is good idea to do a little research too to help you make your choice.

## Relaxation therapies

### Massage and aromatherapy

There are various types of massage including: Indian Head massage (massage of the head shoulders and arms); Holistic massage (massage of the whole body); Swedish massage (massage from the neck down) and shiatsu (using acupressure – pressure on acupuncture points). Massage is often used to reduce tension and pain in muscles, help with poor sleep patterns, improve relaxation and reduce stress. All types of massage can be carried out with or without oil, and can involve the use of aromatherapy oils. However, these oils should only be used by a qualified aromatherapist who will be trained to know which oils are safe for use in epilepsy.

→ For more information about massage visit the General Council for Massage Therapies (GCMT) ([www.gcmt.org.uk](http://www.gcmt.org.uk)) and for shiatsu the Shiatsu Society ([www.shiatsusociety.org](http://www.shiatsusociety.org))

### What are essential oils and how do they work?

Aromatherapy uses pure essential oils: oils that are extracted from plants. Some oils have a relaxing effect on the body and the brain, for example lavender. Some oils have a stimulating effect on the body and brain, for example bergamot. Oils can be diluted in a 'base' oil (a plain oil such as a vegetable or nut oil) and used for massage or they can be diluted and used in a burner to produce an aroma that is inhaled.

When essential oils are massaged into the skin, the tiny molecules of oil pass through the skin and into the tissues and bloodstream. Once in the bloodstream they travel to the brain where they have an effect. When essential oils are inhaled they go straight to the brain via the lungs.

### **Why are some essential oils not recommended for use in epilepsy?**

For people with epilepsy, it is thought that some essential oils may trigger seizures.

- Rosemary, fennel, sage, hyssop, camphor and spike lavender are not recommended for use in epilepsy.
- Peppermint and eucalyptus should also be avoided as they also have a stimulating effect that could affect seizures.

For women that are pregnant there are also a number of other oils that should be avoided.

→ *For more about essential oils and epilepsy visit <http://www.essentialoils.co.za/epilepsy.htm>*

### **Can any essential oils help my epilepsy?**

There are a number of essential oils that are known to have a calming and relaxing effect. If your seizures are triggered by stress, then using these oils to relax may help you to reduce your seizures. Such calming oils include: jasmine, ylang ylang, camomile, and lavender (except spike lavender).

Research was carried out at the University of Birmingham's seizure clinic which involved using essential oils with individuals who had epilepsy. The studies used aromatherapy massage to allow individuals to associate the smell of an essential oil with a state of relaxation. Then, when a person was stressed or felt a seizure was about to start, they could smell the essential oil and this would remind their brain of the relaxing feelings and may stop their seizures from happening. Results show that, with practice, a person may be able to relax by simply smelling the particular oil which could then lead to fewer seizures. Research showed that jasmine oil was the most effective, although this may not be the case for everyone with epilepsy.

→ *For more information about aromatherapy contact the Aromatherapy Council (AC) [www.aromatherapycouncil.co.uk](http://www.aromatherapycouncil.co.uk)*

### **Reflexology**

Reflexology is based on the idea that certain points on the feet and hands (reflex points) relate to parts of the body. The therapist uses pressure on these points to release tension and encourage the body's natural healing processes. Reflexology can be helpful in reducing stress and making you feel relaxed, and can support wellbeing and underlying health.

→ *For more information about reflexology visit the British Reflexology Association at [www.britreflex.co.uk](http://www.britreflex.co.uk)*

### **Relaxation techniques**

Relaxing activities such as meditation, visualisation or slow, focused breathing can help reduce stress and so help to reduce seizures for some people.

Meditation can be a very good way of relaxing, releasing you from stress or anxiety and coping with fatigue and mental tiredness. Over time a meditation practice can help to clear the mind and focus. It can also help with headaches and can promote wellbeing. The benefits of meditation can take time to build up, and a beginner can get disheartened. It is perhaps best to start with a very simple meditation technique for just a few minutes a day, and gradually build up.

Be careful about learning meditation and breathing techniques from a book or a friend, or jumping into an intense practice too quickly. They have a direct effect on electrical activity in the brain and central nervous system and can be powerful. You should be guided by somebody who understands them.

If your seizures tend to happen when you are very relaxed, or during sleep, then deeply relaxing activities such as meditation and hypnotherapy may increase your risk of having seizures.

→ *For more information about meditation visit the British Meditation Society at [www.britishmeditationsociety.org](http://www.britishmeditationsociety.org)*

### **Natural and complementary therapies**

#### **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is a type of ancient Traditional Chinese Medicine. It involves inserting very fine pins or needles into specific points on a person's body to stimulate energy pathways and natural healing processes. Although the needles may only be left inserted for a few seconds, they are more commonly left in place for 30 to 40 minutes. Although there has been no evidence that acupuncture can directly improve a person's epilepsy, it has been found to be effective in reducing stress and anxiety, which can then result in less seizures for some people with epilepsy. It can also improve wellbeing and underlying health, and help with headaches or fatigue associated with seizures. Many GP surgeries are now making acupuncture available to patients through the NHS.

→ *For more information about acupuncture contact the British Acupuncture Council (BAcC) at [www.acupuncture.org.uk](http://www.acupuncture.org.uk)*

### **Ayurveda systems of medicine**

Ayurveda is an ancient Indian health care system that has become very popular in the last 20 years. It covers all aspects of health and uses a combination of herbal medicine, diet, massage, yoga and meditation to treat conditions, deal with underlying health imbalances and promote wellbeing. As with any treatments of this kind - especially herbs and meditation - care must always be taken with epilepsy. Ayurvedic doctors in the UK are also expected to be medically qualified, and so have a good understanding of the links between conventional medicine (prescribed medication and treatment from GP's and hospitals) and complimentary medicine. Because of the great popularity of Ayurveda in the west, a large industry of 'ayurveda' pills and potions has sprung up. Be careful of these and go to a properly qualified doctor.

### **Evening Primrose Oil**

In the past there have been reports that warn against using evening primrose oil when you have epilepsy as it can increase the chances of seizures for some people. However this is no longer felt to be a significant risk for people with epilepsy.

### **Herbal medicine**

Herbal medicine uses remedies made from plants to restore the natural balance of the body and encourage healing. Herbs have been used for thousands of years across the world by many different cultures to treat all manner of health problems, including epilepsy.

There is a lack of evidence for their benefit, but that does not mean they may not benefit some people. Some traditional remedies, for example chinese medicine, may contain several ingredients including animal, vegetable and mineral and have uncertain effects.

Some herbal medicines such as schizandra, kava kava and comfrey may increase the number of seizures for some people.

If you wish to use herbal medicine please speak to a qualified herbalist before buying herbal medicines off the shelf.

St Johns Wort (SJW) is a herbal remedy used to treat mild depression. There are differing views about the safety of using SJW for people with epilepsy taking anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). The Committee on Safety of Medicines recommends that people taking AEDs do not take SJW. They suggest that anyone already taking SJW should see

their doctor to discuss the possibility of withdrawing it. It is important to speak to your doctor first before stopping SJW, as your dose of AED may need to be altered to prevent possible side effects.

→ For more information about herbal medicine contact the British Herbal Medicine Association at [www.bhma.info](http://www.bhma.info)

### **Homeopathy**

Homeopathy is a holistic therapy which treats a person's individual experiences and not just a set of symptoms or a condition. Homeopaths investigate a person's health, life, and feelings in great detail and generally use small amounts of specially prepared doses of natural substances to encourage the body to heal naturally. As well as improving underlying health and wellbeing, homeopathy can be used to help reduce the effects of anxiety and stress and so may lead to less seizures for some people with epilepsy.

→ For more information visit the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital at <http://www.rlhh.eu> or visit the British Homeopathic Association at [www.truhomeopathy.org](http://www.truhomeopathy.org)

### **Training therapies**

#### **Autogenic training**

Autogenic training is a series of mental exercises which brings about relaxation similar to certain meditative states. The exercises allow the mind to become calm by switching off the body's stress response, which then boosts the immune system's function towards repair and recovery of the body. People who learn and practise this therapy report to have increased good health, emotional balance, coping ability, wellbeing, quality of sleep, ability to relax, confidence and energy. They also report decreased anxiety, irritability, reactions to stress, and physical symptoms.

Autogenic therapists work in a variety of NHS settings with a large number based at the Autogenic training clinic at the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital (RLHH).

→ If you feel you may benefit from this kind of therapy, you can be referred to the RLHH by your GP or consultant. Visit [www.rlhh.eu](http://www.rlhh.eu) for more information.

→ You can also read more about autogenic training from the British Autogenic Society at [www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk](http://www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk)

### Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a technique that may help you if your seizures start with a 'warning' or 'aura'. The idea is that you can learn to control your brain activity, and level of relaxation, by watching a display on a computer screen. With practice and support from a trained therapist, some people may be able to limit the length of partial seizures or prevent these spreading to a generalised seizure. Biofeedback training can be effective in some people, but it requires a lot of dedication, time and hard work from both the therapist and the person with epilepsy. Biofeedback is not currently available through the NHS.

→ For more information on epilepsy and seizures see NSE leaflet 'seizures'

### Combined relaxation therapy and behaviour modification therapy

Relaxation therapy is a technique to calm your mind by releasing the tension in your body and relaxing your muscles. The idea is that once your muscles are relaxed, your mind relaxes. Behaviour modification therapy involves working with a therapist to learn ways to change how you behave. The goal is to help you to live a full life while accepting that you have epilepsy.

Relaxation therapy combined with behaviour modification therapy is used for both children and adults. The idea is that a combination of the two treatments might work better than just one of them. At the moment there is no evidence that these combined treatments can help to control seizures. However there is evidence that this combined treatment can make some people feel less anxious and can also help them to adjust to having epilepsy.

Results have been good particularly for people who find that stress is a major trigger for their seizures. This treatment would normally be carried out by clinical psychology teams in hospital but there are currently only a small number of hospitals that offer this combined treatment.

### Further information

- A government-recognised body called the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) has recently been launched. This currently holds a register of regulated therapists in the fields of massage therapy, nutritional therapy, aromatherapy and reflexology. It is also currently in discussions with the professional bodies representing yoga therapy, shiatsu, Alexander technique, bowen technique, cranial therapy and reiki.
- For more information on how to choose a complementary therapy visit The Princes Foundation for Integrated Health at [www.fih.org.uk/information\\_library](http://www.fih.org.uk/information_library) and click on 'complementary healthcare: a guide'.
- You can also visit the website for the Centre for Complementary and Integrated Medicine at [www.complemed.co.uk](http://www.complemed.co.uk)
- Overcoming anxiety – a self-help course (3 books) £21 Author: Dr Helen Kennerley (2008) ISBN: 978-1854874221 There are also other self-help guides for overcoming anxiety.

To become an associate member call 01494 601 402 or email [members@epilepsysociety.org.uk](mailto:members@epilepsysociety.org.uk)  
For a fundraising pack call 01494 601 300 or email [fundraising@epilepsysociety.org.uk](mailto:fundraising@epilepsysociety.org.uk)

### Epilepsy Information Services National Society for Epilepsy

Chesham Lane, Chalfont St. Peter, Bucks SL9 0RJ  
[www.epilepsysociety.org.uk](http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk)

### Epilepsy Helpline

01494 601 400 (national call rate)  
Monday – Friday 10am – 4pm  
(Translation service available)

