PARKINSON’S AND COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

Complementary therapies are often used alongside traditional medication for the management of Parkinson’s. A range of different therapies are available which may alleviate a variety of Parkinson’s symptoms. While there is little hard evidence of the effectiveness of these therapies many people find that they are beneficial especially for a sense of well-being. Before trying any alternative method please discuss options with your doctor. Remember that ‘complementary’ means: that which fills out or makes whole. Complementary medicine does not replace orthodox medicine.

Contacts for complementary therapies can be obtained through your Field Officer or found through the Yellow Pages of the telephone book – look for registered practitioners. This fact sheet explains just some of the many complementary therapies available.

Acupuncture
This ancient form of treatment has been practiced in China for over 2000 years. Some British research found that the majority of people with Parkinson’s (about 60%) experienced at least a slight benefit from acupuncture. Make sure any acupuncturist you go to has adequate training and experience. Costs per session can amount to a considerable sum so if you think that you are not improving after a few sessions, you might like to consider trying something else.

Acupressure
This treatment otherwise known as pressure-point massage is used to reduce symptoms such as nausea, excessive salivation, anxiety, or muscle pain. Acupressure is also used to impart vital energy.
Acupressure may be of some use as a short-term, supportive attempt to treat concomitant symptoms. Some case reports and field studies claim efficacy; however, success is probably seen in only a small proportion of patients.

Alexander Technique
The Alexander Technique is used to help people become more aware of balance, posture and coordination in everyday activities.
It is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support and coordination. The technique teaches the use of the appropriate amount of effort for a particular activity, giving you more energy for all your activities. When applying the Alexander Technique, you will learn:
- How to release unnecessary tension
- Different ways of moving that put less strain on the spine, joints and muscles.
- How to carry out everyday activities more efficiently and gracefully.
The Alexander Technique is taught by the teacher guiding the student verbally and with his/her hands in everyday movements (such as standing up, sitting, walking, writing, or lying down); showing the student how each movement can be improved so that stress and pain is reduced.
Alexander Technique sessions usually are tailored to each individual need. Chair-work, table-work, stretches and movement are all used to help relieve tension and pain, increasing self awareness, and improving body use.
In the UK a trial on the benefits of the technique showed that a level of improvement for people with Parkinson’s which was maintained six months after the end of the trial.
Aromatherapy
Aromatherapists use essential oils from plants that are particularly suited to you. They massage (massage therapy is discussed below) them into your skin, put them into your bath or just let you smell them. In any case, the effect can be an intense and most agreeable relaxation. There is no scientific evidence that aromatherapy is specifically effective in treating Parkinson’s. In a survey conducted by PDS in the UK more than 80% of people with Parkinson’s thought that aromatherapy had helped them at least slightly. If relaxation is what you need, there is little reason not to try it.

Hydrotherapy
Hydrotherapy is a form of treatment or exercise instructed by an Aquatic Physiotherapist or qualified Instructor, conducted in a heated pool.
Benefits of hydrotherapy include:
- Aerobic
- Strengthens muscles
- Pain Relief
- Increased Mobility
- Stress Reduction
- Cardiovascular fitness
- Relaxation
- Reduce high blood pressure/controlling weight
- Improves balance and co-ordination.

Massage
Many people with Parkinson’s suffer from stiffness and muscular pain. There is little doubt that massage (there are, of course, many types of massage) can be useful in easing these symptoms. A massage is also uniquely relaxing – both for the muscles and the mind. It is an altogether enjoyable experience. In a survey conducted by PDS, UK more than 90% experienced at least a slight benefit. What is more, it is safe.

Osteopathy
Osteopathy is a system of healing that diagnoses and treats body conditions which have mechanical disturbances as their cause or as an integral part. Mechanical disturbances include changed elasticity of soft tissues (skin, connective tissue, muscles, ligaments, tendons), changed joint mobility (stiff or loose joints). The main methods of treatment are special techniques for soft tissues, followed by working on joints (repetitive rhythmic movements with specific manipulation, if necessary). Overseas studies have found that osteopathy can be beneficial in improving walking ability in people with Parkinson’s.

Physiotherapy
Induces relaxation, is invigorating, and improves various physical functions. Use as supportive therapy. Many Parkinson’s divisions conduct their own physiotherapy sessions; consult your local Field Officer for further information.
Reflexology
Reflexology is a method of stimulating reflex areas in the feet, hands, or ears that correspond to each and every gland, organ and part of the body. Correct stimulation of reflex areas relieves stress and tension, deeply relaxing the whole body from head to toe. This therapeutic relaxation serves to normalize the body’s functioning, effectively facilitating the body’s healing process, revitalizing and enhancing your total health. This is particularly good for bladder control problems.

Tai Chi
Tai Chi is an ancient form of exercise that has been practised in China for hundreds of years. Tai Chi exercises include a series of gentle, fluid movements that are good for maintaining the mobility and flexibility of the musculo-skeletal system. According to ACC there is evidence that Tai Chi can help prevent falls in older adults. The benefits include:

- improved fitness
- increased muscular strength
- better balance
- better flexibility
- a reduced risk of falls.

Modified Tai Chi classes have been especially designed to focus on exercises that improve lower body strength and balance and help prevent falls.

www.tai-chin.co.nz

Yoga
Research has shown yoga to be a beneficial alternative therapy for people with Parkinson’s. Learning to control the breath, practising movements to keep the body supple and stilling the mind through relaxation, are all helpful towards a healthy and happy lifestyle. Parkinson’s itself does not necessarily weaken the muscles. This is usually caused by lack of movement as they withdraw into themselves, so exercise is good. Daily practice should be encouraged, but not enough to cause fatigue.

Comments from people with Parkinson's who have used various complementary therapies.

Massage: “Heaven! When I was having a massage session three times a week, people didn’t even know that I had Parkinson’s. Even on days when I was completely knotted up massage helped my flexibility.” Nicole, Wellington

Alternative medicine – what me? Never! I’m more your traditional, none of that hocus-pocus type patient. But, I must say when an acquaintance, a fellow PD sufferer, told me that acupuncture in the early stages of the disease, had helped her, I thought “fancy”. Well, a couple of days later in the local rag, I see an acupuncturist is setting up a practice two days per week in Waikanae. (that’s where I live). I’m not one to believe in fate, or crystals and incense, and that sort of thing. But I must say it seemed a bit of a coincidence. Don’t ever let it be said that my mind is not open to change! I’ve had a number of sessions now; just lying on the couch like a balding porcupine. Then a back massage, literally head to toe, which sets every muscle into relax mode and every nerve a-tingling.
The affected arm and leg are now less rigid, and tremors all but disappeared. It’s not a cure, John Yuan, the practitioner, tells me, it simply relieves the symptoms in the early stages.
Fate, or just plain luck; in every way I feel better than I have in a number of years. Maybe it’s all in my head – if it is, I hope it stays there.” Jocelyn, Waikanae.

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Please do not interpret anything in this fact sheet as personal medical advice, always check any medical problem with your Doctor.

Further information may be obtained from your local branch of Parkinsons New Zealand or Freephone 0800 473 463.