

Parkinson's and complementary therapies

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Complementary therapies are commonly used in addition to main treatments for the management of Parkinson's symptoms including – but not limited to – pain, reduced mobility, balance and gait challenges which leave people more exposed to the risk of falls; and depleted energy levels. Many people find one or more complementary therapies beneficial.

Conventional medicine focuses on understanding and correcting the problems that are causing symptoms. Complementary therapies aim to treat the whole person including mind, body and spirit, rather than just the symptoms.

The term is often confused with alternative medicine. However, alternative medicine refers to a replacement for mainstream or conventional medicine, based on historical or cultural traditions, rather than scientific evidence. We strongly recommend against replacing your medication with an alternative treatment.

Your Parkinson's New Zealand Community Educator can provide more information on the complementary therapies available locally and how to access them.

Are complementary therapies beneficial? There is no simple answer to this question. There are so many types of therapy; it is impossible to generalise. There is evidence to show the benefits of some complementary therapies. For others, there is no research or evidence available, however, we hear many positive reports from people. More research is required regarding a number of such therapies.

The following list of therapies is not intended to be exhaustive. The main criteria we applied in compiling the list was the availability of the therapy in New Zealand, the evidence base and/or positive reports from people with Parkinson's or carers who have benefitted from the therapy, and the physical and practical consequences of the therapy. A number of therapies which may help people with Parkinson's psychologically such as laughter yoga are also included in this factsheet but due to space restrictions we have focused on managing physical symptoms.

ACUPUNCTURE

This ancient form of treatment has been practiced in China for over 2000 years and may reduce pain, insomnia and anxiety in people with Parkinson's. Make sure any acupuncturist you go to has adequate training and experience. A register of New Zealand acupuncturists is available at www.acupuncture.org.nz.

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The technique helps people become more aware of their balance, posture and coordination in their everyday activities and more efficiently apply the appropriate level of effort for a particular

activity. This emphasis on not wasting energy leaves more for other activities. The Alexander Technique has been associated with reducing tremor and pain, ameliorating voice issues and improving balance. A directory of Alexander Technique teachers is available at www.alexandertechnique.org.nz.

BOWEN TECHNIQUE

Bowen Technique is a very gentle, touch-based therapy. The practitioner aims to restore balance in a person's body by softly manipulating their muscles and soft tissue. The technique may help muscle soreness and stiffness and bring positive effects in terms of balance and posture. The Bowen Technique is used widely. The official site of the Bowen Association of New Zealand can be viewed at www.bowtech.org.nz.

CONDUCTIVE EDUCATION

Conductive education is a rehabilitation system based on an educational approach, rather than a therapeutic one. Some people find that conductive education can help control the physical symptoms of Parkinson's, including tremor, rigidity and slowness of movement. A number of practitioners are available throughout New Zealand. We recommend you visit www.conductive-education.org.nz to find out more.

DANCE THERAPY

Dance therapy uses dance as a way of treating some physical and mental conditions. Many people enjoy dancing as a form of exercise and as a social activity. Additionally limited research to date suggests that some forms of dancing particularly, such as tango, may improve balance and the way a person with Parkinson's walks. Visit www.dancetherapy.co.nz for further information.

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD

The Feldenkrais Method. By becoming more aware of their own movements, people can improve their mobility. Lessons may involve doing a sequence of movements that involve thinking, sensing, moving and imagining. Studies show that Feldenkrais helps with balance and mobility. People also use this method to find relief from pain. The New Zealand Feldenkrais Guild's website is at www.feldenkrais.org.nz.

MASSAGE

Massage can ease muscular pain and stiffness. Massage is also uniquely relaxing—both for a person's muscles and their mind. It is an altogether enjoyable experience. Find out more at www.massagenewzealand.org.nz.

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. This includes a change in the elasticity of soft tissues and joint mobility (stiff or loose joints). Studies have found that osteopathy can be beneficial in improving the ability of people with Parkinson's to walk well. A list of registered osteopaths is available at www.osteopathiccouncil.org.nz.

TAI CHI

Tai Chi is an ancient form of exercise that has been practised in China for thousands 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. There is evidence that Tai Chi can help prevent falls in older adults. Modified Tai Chi classes have been especially designed to focus on exercises that improve lower body strength and balance and help prevent falls. There are a number of different New Zealand Tai Chi websites where you can find out more.

YOGA

Yoga has been shown through research to be a beneficial complementary therapy for people with Parkinson's. Learning to control one's breath, practising movements to keep the body supple and calming the mind through relaxation, all contribute to a healthier, happier lifestyle. Find more information at www.iyta.org.nz.

LAUGHTER THERAPY/LAUGHTER YOGA

Laughter therapy/Laughter Yoga uses exercise techniques to stimulate the body into laughter. The idea is that these

techniques can help to boost your immune system, improve respiration and circulation, encourage positive thinking and help you to relax. There is little research on the benefits of laughter for people with Parkinson's. But there is evidence to suggest that laughter helps to release endorphins – chemicals that can improve your mood and may relieve pain. Find out more at www.laughteryoga.org.nz.

MUSIC THERAPY

Music therapy is the use of music by trained professionals as a treatment for some physical and mental conditions. It has been suggested that music can improve movement and speech and help people to relax or talk about feelings or ideas they have. Some people with Parkinson's find that listening to strong rhythmic music can improve their walking, prevent hesitations and overcome freezing episodes. There have been several small studies of music therapy in Parkinson's, some of which had promising results. Find out more at www.musictherapy.org.nz.

REIKI

Reiki means universal life energy in Japanese. During treatment, the practitioner channels healing energy to you by placing their hands on or near your body. The whole person is treated, rather than specific symptoms and healing is promoted through bringing the patient into harmony and balance. A systematic review concluded Reiki may bring modest pain relief and another study recognised that Reiki improved mood, but more research is needed. Find out more at www.reiki.org.nz.

