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Complementary medicine (CM), sometimes also less aptly called 'alternative medicine', remains a highly controversial issue. Some believe in it almost in a religious sense, others condemn it outright as pure quackery. Notwithstanding this long-standing debate, CM has become immensely popular in recent years. Estimates vary but some suggest that about half of the general population is using some form of CM. Individuals living with chronic diseases like Parkinson's are even more likely to try CM.

This sheet offers information on:

- 1 Cure versus care
- 2 Different types of complementary therapies
- 3 How to find a therapist

One may well ask, why is it so popular? It seems almost ironic that people are turning away from modern medicine just as it is becoming successful as never before. The reasons for CM's popularity are complex. Maybe people want to try everything possible to get well and many could be disillusioned with mainstream medicine in spite of its powerful drugs. Generally speaking, those individuals with chronic ailments for which mainstream medicine does not offer a cure are most likely to try their luck with CM.

Therefore, if you have Parkinson's you are bound to be tempted. Even though exact figures are still missing, we suspect that many people with Parkinson's have tried some form of CM. From a recent survey done by the PDS Complementary Therapy Working Group, it is clear that about 65% of PDS's members (the questionnaire was

returned by 2,274 people with Parkinson's) have an interest in CM.

In this sheet you will find some information about CM in relation to Parkinson's. It will guide you to therapies that might be worth trying.

### 1. Cure versus Care

In Britain, CM is practised mostly by non-medically trained practitioners. That is not to say that some CM providers are not competently trained, but many have little training and few will fully understand the complexities of your condition. It is important therefore that you do not abandon prescribed drugs, that you continue to see your doctor and tell him/her exactly what form of CM you are using. Unfortunately some CM practitioners might advise otherwise but such advice is not trustworthy. Remember that 'complementary' means: *that which fills out or makes whole*. Complementary medicine does not replace orthodox medicine.

Some CM providers might raise your hopes and promise a cure. No form of CM can cure Parkinson's. People who tell you otherwise are either naïve or deliberately misleading you. In both cases they are endangering your health.

Nevertheless, CM could still have something to offer you. There is an important difference between cure and care. CM can't cure Parkinson's but, in many cases, it may ease your symptoms and help you to cope with your condition. In Table 1 later on in this sheet you will find a list of

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symptoms that occur often with Parkinson's and which might be amenable to complementary therapies.

## 2. Complementary Therapies

CM comprises a confusing array of treatments. The following will give you a very brief introduction to the therapies that you are likely to encounter and some indication as to which are worth trying for what symptom, what the scientific evidence for or against tells us, and what costs you may incur.

### a) Acupuncture

This ancient form of treatment has been practised in China for over 2000 years. It has become highly popular in the west since the '70s. Traditional acupuncturists believe in a 'life force' called *Chi*. If it is disturbed, illness will result. To rebalance it, acupuncturists stick thin needles in 'acupoints' which are situated along meridians, the channels for the flow of Chi. Western 'scientific' acupuncturists are not entirely convinced of this, but think that acupuncture operates through definable neurophysiological principles.

The evidence for whether or not acupuncture works better than a placebo is far from straightforward. (A placebo is a harmless, inactive substance or procedure; any positive effect comes from a patient's belief in it.) Optimists would say acupuncture works for chronic pain. If you have pain, you simply want to get rid of it and you don't care whether this is through the help of a placebo effect. Preliminary data from the PDS survey show that the majority of people with Parkinson's (about 60%) experienced at least a slight benefit from acupuncture. In other words, acupuncture is worth a try. It does carry certain risks though. These may be minimal, but you should make sure that your acupuncturist has adequate training and experience and uses only disposable needles. Costs per session can amount to a substantial sum, because the acupuncturist will point out that you need a whole series of treatments. If you do not perceive any benefit after, say the third session, you might consider giving it up.

A small non-blinded<sup>1</sup> pilot study of the safety, tolerability, and efficacy of acupuncture for the symptoms of Parkinson's was recently published in the medical journal *Movement Disorders*. A range of Parkinson's and behavioural scales failed to show improvement following acupuncture other than sleep benefit, although patients reported subjective improvement of individual symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Further research is needed.

### b) Alexander technique

The Alexander Technique is a method where clients learn to optimise posture and muscle activity. A randomised clinical trial showed that it can improve self-assessed disability of people with Parkinson's compared to no intervention or massage.<sup>3</sup> The benefit lasted six months or longer. This trial requires independent replication. See PDS information sheet *Alexander Technique (FS34)*.

### c) 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 the PDS survey 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.

<sup>1</sup> A non-blinded study means that the researchers and participants know what treatment is being given to particular individuals in a research trial. Although these are useful, blinded studies (particularly double blind studies in which the researchers and participants do not know what treatment is being given to which individual) are necessary in research to eliminate expectations that could bias the trial results.

<sup>2</sup> Shulman L M et al, Acupuncture Therapy for the Symptoms of Parkinson's Disease, *Movement Disorders*, 2002 Jul;17 (4): 799-802

<sup>3</sup> Stallibrass C, Chalmers C. Randomized controlled trial of the Alexander Technique for idiopathic Parkinson's disease. *Clinical Rehabilitation* 2002;16:705-18

Aromatherapy does not have any serious side effects. Some oils are expensive and charged as extra. You may also gain benefit from buying essential oils and using them at home. This would be much cheaper than seeing an aromatherapist. (For further information, see the PDS Information Sheet on Aromatherapy, code FS18)

#### d) Healing

Healers plug into a 'source of energy' in order to enhance your body's self-healing. No one (not even the healers) can define this energy. Some people swear by it. They feel less ill and more relaxed or they can cope better with their problems or they experience a new sense of well-being. In the survey of people with Parkinson's some 80% had experienced at least a slight benefit from healing. Scientifically, however, there is little hard evidence to suggest that healing has specific effects. However, if it helps you, why not? If nothing else, healing is safe. Many healers don't even take money.

#### e) Herbalism

Plants can provide powerful remedies. Unfortunately, there is no herb that specifically cures Parkinson's. A small, placebo-controlled trial of an extract of *Banisteriopsis caapi* suggested that this herb can lead to improvements in motor function.<sup>4</sup> These results require independent replication. Depending on your main symptom, a herbalist may be able to offer some help. For instance Ginkgo biloba has been shown to help concentration although there are no trials on people with Parkinson's as yet. Therefore, it is not clear whether it will alleviate lack of concentration if this becomes a problem for you. At the very least, however, Ginkgo biloba is almost entirely free of serious side effects.

Other people with Parkinson's may feel tired and worn out. There are several herbal tonics that might help. Ginseng is perhaps the best known. It is worth a try, but be sure to observe the recommended dosage. Ginseng does have a

number of unwanted side effects, particularly as it may be addictive, when you overdose.

In Britain, herbalism is very much under-rated. However, it is potentially useful for a variety of symptoms. In the PDS survey about 50% of people with Parkinson's experienced at least a slight benefit from herbalism. However, being powerful, many herbs are also associated with side effects. Some of these can be serious. So if you see a herbalist, make sure it is a reputable one and **make sure you discuss it with your doctor first**. Some herbal prescriptions are costly and the total expenses can add up quickly.

#### f) Homoeopathy

Homoeopaths insist that they do not treat disease but individuals. Thus many would assume that they should be able to help you quite regardless of your condition. Scientifically speaking, it is still an unanswered question whether homoeopathic remedies, which are highly diluted, are more than placebos. The fact is, however, that many people (in the PDS survey the figure was about 60%) experience at least a slight improvement of their symptoms after consulting a homoeopath. They do not worry whether this is due to a placebo effect. People with Parkinson's often suffer from cramps, and there is some preliminary evidence that the homoeopathic remedy 'Cuprum' helps for this symptom. There is little reason to fear serious side effects from homoeopathic treatments. Since consultations with a homoeopath take a lot of time, therapy is not cheap.

#### g) 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 the PDS survey more than 90% experienced at least a slight benefit. What is more, it is safe. A small pilot study suggests that massage therapy is superior to progressive muscle relaxation exercise in improving activities of daily living in people with

<sup>4</sup> Serrano-Dueñas M, Cardozo-Pelaez F, Sánchez-Ramos JR. Effects of *Banisteriopsis caapi* extract on Parkinson's Disease. *The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine* 2001;5:127-32.

Parkinson's.<sup>5</sup> This trial requires independent replication.

#### **h) Reflexology**

Reflexologists believe that your whole body is mapped out on the sole of your foot. By massaging certain areas of your foot, they hope to influence defined inner organs – including the brain. However, there is no evidence that it has a specific effect on your condition. Maybe there is no benefit other than relaxation. Yet, in the PDS survey about 75% of people with Parkinson's thought it was at least slightly beneficial.

#### **i) Spinal manipulation**

Chiropractic and osteopathy are similar in that both manipulate the spine in order to alleviate back pain or other, mainly musculo-skeletal, problems. There is some evidence to show that spinal manipulation helps acute low back pain. For other conditions, the evidence is far less compelling or virtually non-existent.

If you suffer from low back pain, do try spinal manipulation. In the PDS survey about 75% thought it was at least slightly beneficial. However, do not believe practitioners who promise a cure for Parkinson's. We recommend that you check the qualifications of the practitioner first, because untrained people can damage rather than help you. Some forms of spinal manipulation may be unsuitable for people with osteoporosis, which affects most women after the menopause, but many elderly men as well.

#### **j) Special diets**

Dietary treatments are mostly in the realm of mainstream medicine. But there are also some that are frequently advocated by complementary practitioners. They range from whole food to macrobiotic diets. There is no evidence that any of these is really helpful for Parkinson's. Furthermore, some of these diets can lead to

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<sup>5</sup> Hernandez-Reif M, Field T, Lergie S *et al.* Parkinson's disease symptoms are differentially affected by massage therapy vs progressive muscle relaxation: a pilot study. *J Bodywork and Movement Therapies* 2002;**6**:177-82.

serious nutritional deficiencies. This, however, does not mean that a good nutritionist cannot assist you in finding the most suitable diet. In the PDS survey about 85% felt that dietary therapy was at least slightly beneficial. *See the PDS publications Parkinson's and Diet (B65).*

#### **k) Supplements**

The market for supplements is booming – everything from trace elements to vitamins, from herbals to fish oil. There is no compelling evidence that supplements are helpful in treating Parkinson's. The only exception is co-enzyme Q10. A recent multicentre trial showed that it was more effective than placebo at preventing disability in people with Parkinson's.<sup>6</sup> The dosage used was up to 1200 mg per day and this was shown to cause no serious adverse effects. *See PDS information sheets, Coenzyme Q10 (FS74) and Antioxidants (FS67).*

Some herbal treatments (see above) may be useful for specific Parkinson's symptoms but if you are eating a balanced diet there is normally no need for supplements. A recent study suggested that moderate intake of dietary vitamin E in foods (not supplements) may reduce the risk of Parkinson's in later life.<sup>7</sup>

#### **l) Yoga**

Yoga is a 'treatment package' of various elements including relaxation, breathing techniques and posture. It is conceivable that it might help the postural instability in Parkinson's. In the PDS survey about 95% of people with Parkinson's experienced at least a slight benefit from yoga. In fact, it was rated overall as the most effective of all complementary therapies. However, no hard data on scientifically proven efficacy is available at present. There are no serious side effects to be anticipated and thus yoga too might be worth a try. A practitioner will teach you the basic techniques in a series of supervised sessions.

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<sup>6</sup> Shults CW, Oakes D, Kieburtz K *et al.* Effects of Coenzyme Q10 in early Parkinson disease. *Arch Neurol* 2002;**59**:1541-50.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang SM, Hernán MA, Chen PHH, Spiegelman D, Willett WC, Ascherio A. Intakes of vitamins E and C, carotenoids, vitamin supplements, and PD risk. *Neurology* 2002;**59**:1161-9.

**Table 1. Frequent symptoms of Parkinson's that may respond to complementary therapies**

Symptom	Therapy
lack of concentration	e.g. Ginkgo biloba
depression	e.g. Hypericum
postural instability	e.g. yoga
tiredness	Various relaxation techniques
muscular stiffness	e.g. massage

### 3. How to find a Therapist

Understandably, people with Parkinson's often get desperate for a cure or at least some help with their symptoms. Thus you could be tempted to try treatments which, on the basis of the evidence to date, do more harm than good.

There are a few points that are well worth remembering if you have decided to try what CM has to offer you. The first rule should always be to avoid harm. You are well advised therefore to consider the following:

- Use therapists who belong to a credible professional association or society
- Discuss with your doctor what you might try for what benefit
- Tell your doctor what you have opted for
- Enquire about the therapist's training, clinical experience and insurance cover
- Do not trust therapists who promise a cure for Parkinson's or who try to interfere with your prescribed medications.
- Insist on a proper treatment plan and cost estimates

### 4. Conclusions

Many people with Parkinson's are interested in complementary therapies. Even though no cure is on offer, these treatments may alleviate a variety of Parkinson's symptoms. There is little hard evidence, however. The bottom line is to be cautious yet open-minded. Discuss things with

your doctor and, if no harm is conceivable, give it a try.

### 5. Further information

The PDS recommends that people interested in trying complementary therapies should consult their doctor to ensure that the complementary approach in question is not contraindicated for people with Parkinson's and that people find a qualified complementary therapist. GP surgeries can often provide lists of local practitioners. The Institute for Complementary Medicine can also provide information and advice. Contact details:

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 PO Box 194 (Enclose SAE)  
 London SE16 1QZ Telephone: 020 7237 5165,  
 Email at [icm@icmedicine.co.uk](mailto:icm@icmedicine.co.uk).  
 Website: [www.icmedicine.co.uk](http://www.icmedicine.co.uk).

### 6. Recommended Reading

- "Which? Guide to Complementary Medicine"
- "Alternative medicine, what works" by A. Fugh-Berman, Odonia Press, Tuscon USA, 1996.
- "The alternative medicine handbook: the complete reference guide to alternative and complementary medicine", by B. Cassileth, WW Norton Co., New York, 1998.

### Acknowledgements

*This information sheet written by Professor Ernst was originally published in the Parkinson's Disease Self-Care manual/CD-rom, edited by Professor R.K. Griffiths CBE and E.H. Coene MD, published by Foundation September and is reprinted with permission from the author and publishers. For more information on the manual/CD-rom see [www.pdupdate.org](http://www.pdupdate.org)*

*PDS Information Sheet code FS35  
 Updated February 2003  
 Produced by the PDS Information Department*

*All PDS information sheets are reviewed on a yearly basis in January and updated as soon as relevant new information becomes available.*