

ovacome..
ovarian cancer

Living with ovarian cancer

Complementary therapies



Ovacom is a national charity providing support and information to anyone affected by ovarian cancer.

We run a free telephone and email support line and work to raise awareness and give a voice to all those affected by ovarian cancer.

This booklet is part of our *Living with ovarian cancer* series.

It looks at the complementary therapies that are most commonly used by people with ovarian cancer, how they can help to manage treatment side effects and improve quality of life.



Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are used alongside medical treatment, such as chemotherapy, for ovarian cancer.

What are complementary therapies?

Complementary therapies can help you to feel better and more able to manage side effects of the cancer and its treatments. They may help you to be more comfortable and feel more in control.

There are many complementary therapies that are used by people with cancer. This information covers massage, aromatherapy, acupuncture, yoga, mindfulness and vitamin and other supplements. These are the complementary therapies that people most often ask us about.

Points to remember

- Tell your doctor if you plan to use a complementary therapy as some can interact with conventional ovarian cancer treatment.
- It is best to avoid herbal treatments during chemotherapy.
- Complementary therapies are used alongside conventional medication; this is different from alternative therapies, which are used instead of conventional medical treatment.

- Complementary therapies cannot prevent or cure cancer.
- If you want to use a complementary therapy, find a qualified practitioner who is trained to work with cancer patients.

Massage therapies

Massage therapies that are available as complementary therapies for people with cancer include hands-on massage with oils and creams, such as shiatsu, which are based on traditional Japanese practice, and reflexology which is a massage technique applied to your hands or feet.

In traditional Chinese medicine there is a view that energy (called chi or qi) flows around your body in channels called meridians and along the meridians are pressure points.

Shiatsu and reflexology seek to balance the flow of energy to promote wellbeing. You stay fully clothed for these treatments and the practitioner will apply pressure to certain points on your body.

Reflexology

Reflexology is based on a theory that points on your hands and feet are connected through reflexes and meridians to other parts of your body, so massaging them will stimulate areas throughout your body and promote healing.

Reflexology can help you to relax and to sleep. It also has the benefit of providing treatment for your whole body without you needing to undress or be touched anywhere other than your feet.

Manual lymphatic drainage

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is given as a normal part of lymphoedema management so it is not strictly a complementary therapy. It is a very light massage that can help if you have had lymph nodes removed as part of your ovarian cancer treatment. It encourages lymph to drain from your tissues and so reduces swelling. MLD also uses deep breathing techniques and is sometimes used in combination with compression bandaging.

Reiki

Reiki is a therapy where energy is channelled to you from the practitioner's hands. They may not touch you at all but focus on the parts of the body they sense to be depleted.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture inserts fine needles at certain meridian points in your body to balance the energy flow through your body.

In western medicine acupuncture is used to stimulate nerves and it is recognised as being helpful in pain management. This means you may be able to access this treatment in the NHS.

Acupuncture is also thought to help with nausea and sickness, fatigue, breathlessness and menopause symptoms.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils extracted from plants. It is often used with massage as the oils can be absorbed through the skin and stimulate the senses through smell. Different oils are thought to have different benefits. Lavender oil is thought to promote relaxation while citrus oils such as orange and lemon are thought to be energising.

Some people report that aromatherapy has reduced nausea. Other reported benefits are helping with anxiety, stress, fatigue and promoting relaxation.

Yoga

Yoga is an ancient Indian form of exercise that focuses on strength, flexibility and breathing to promote physical and mental wellbeing. It involves different body postures, relaxation and meditation. There are different types of yoga, some use gentle stretching while others use more vigorous movements.

Some people with cancer find that yoga can help them feel better. Studies have shown that after a four week course in yoga, cancer patients who had finished their treatment had fewer problems sleeping and were less tired.

There is also some evidence that yoga can relieve menopause symptoms such as hot flushes and joint pain. You may be able to access yoga through the NHS as sessions may be available in hospital or your GP practice.

Tai chi and Qi Gong

These exercises are based in traditional Chinese medicine theory and aim to encourage energy flow to promote health. Originally a martial art, they are now practised more as a gentle exercise, using flowing movements and deep breathing.

Research into tai chi suggests it can help reduce stress, and improve posture, balance and general mobility, and increase leg strength.

Mindfulness

This is improving your mental wellbeing by focussing your attention on the present moment and becoming more aware of your own thoughts, feelings and surroundings. Mindfulness aims to enhance your enjoyment of life and your understanding of yourself.

Being more aware of your own thoughts and feelings can help you to notice signs of stress and anxiety earlier and find ways of relieving them. Mindfulness is recommended by NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) as a way of preventing depression in people who have had three previous episodes.

A more formal way of practising mindfulness is mindfulness meditation. This is sitting quietly and paying attention to your thoughts, sounds and breathing or other parts of your body, and bringing your attention back to those elements if your mind starts to wander.

There are various online resources to help guide you through mindfulness exercises. You can search online or call our support line for more information.

Visualisation

This means using your mind to see a visual image representing your cancer and its symptoms disappearing.

This could be imagining the cancer as ice which melts away when the sun comes out; or seeing chemotherapy as it destroys cancer cells.

Vitamin therapy

There has been interest in the use of high doses of vitamin C as a cancer therapy. A study using mice has shown that injections of high doses of vitamin C could slow the progression of disease in them.

Studies on humans have focussed on whether high dose injections are safe. These studies were on patients with lung and brain tumours and showed that the injections were safe, but not whether they were effective.

Some research has shown that vitamin C may help to manage the side effects of cancer treatment. Other trials have been stopped due to the severe side effects of high doses of vitamin C and others suggest that vitamin C can interfere with the effectiveness of anti-cancer drugs.

There is no evidence yet that vitamin C improves survival.

Research has mainly looked at very high doses of vitamin C being delivered by intravenous injection. The doses used have been much higher than those available through using supplements or through food. The side effects were nausea, diarrhoea, stomach cramps, low blood sugar and low blood pressure.

Current NHS advice for people with cancer regarding vitamins is to aim to meet your nutritional needs from your regular diet. Dietary supplements are not recommended for cancer prevention or after treatment unless specifically advised.

People with cancer are advised to avoid large doses of supplements and ensure their medical team is aware if they are taking them.

Plants and herbs

More than half of people with a cancer diagnosis use herbs to help them with relaxation and cope with anxiety and depression. They use them alongside their conventional cancer treatments. The National Institute of Medical Herbalists lists herbalists near you.

A herbalist will ask you about your lifestyle health and diet and will take a medical history.

They will feel your pulse, take your blood pressure and examine your skin and nails. They may feel your abdomen and look at your tongue and eyes. Your herbalist may then offer you a tincture which is a diluted alcohol solution of plant material. It is important for you to know all the ingredients of this.

Although some plants are known to have cancer reducing properties, such as yew which is the basis of the chemotherapy drug Taxol, there is no strong evidence that herbs can treat, prevent or cure cancer.

Some herbs can have serious side effects. Others can affect cancer treatments; these include garlic, ginko, Echinacea, ginseng, kava and St Johns wort. Asian ginseng and bilberry can interfere with drugs and increase the risk of bleeding after surgery.

Turmeric

The active ingredient of turmeric is curcumin which has been shown to have anticancer effects on cancer cells. Lower rates of certain cancers have been reported in areas of the world where there is high consumption of curcumin. However, there is no clear evidence that it can prevent or treat cancer. Current NHS advice is to include turmeric in your diet if you enjoy it, but there is no need to take a higher dose supplement.

A 2013 study on bowel cancer cells found that combining chemotherapy treatment with curcumin might be more effective than using chemotherapy alone.

Always tell your medical team if you are using turmeric. It can interact with certain drugs used to treat ovarian cancer, including Taxol and Caelyx. Turmeric can also interfere with blood thinners.

A turmeric supplement sold as Fortodol or Miradin has a warning from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) as it contains a strong anti-inflammatory drug called nimesulide which can cause liver damage.

For more information

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) is the UK voluntary regulator for complementary health practitioners. It was set up with government support to protect the public by providing a UK voluntary register of health practitioners.

www.cnhc.org.uk

Useful links

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's About Herbs database
www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs

MedlinePlus Herbs and Supplements
medlineplus.gov/druginformation.html

National Institute of Medical Herbalists www.nimh.org.uk

British Medical Acupuncture Society www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk

British Acupuncture Council www.acupuncture.org.uk

International Federation of Professional Aromatherapists
ifparoma.org

European Herbal and Traditional Medicine Practitioners Association (EHTPA)
ehtpa.org

British Herbal Medicine Association (BHMA) bhma.info

The British Wheel of Yoga
www.bwy.org.uk

Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) www.hcpc-uk.org

The Tai Chi Union for Great Britain has a list of teachers on their website here: www.taichiunion.com

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/medicines-and-healthcare-products-regulatory-agency

If you would like more information on the sources and references for this booklet, please call us on 0800 008 7054. If you would like to discuss anything about ovarian cancer, please phone our support line on 0800 008 7054 Monday to Friday between 10am and 5pm. You can also visit our website at www.ovacome.org.uk.

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Disclaimer

Ovacome booklets provide information and support. We make every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information at the time of publication. The information we give is not a substitute for professional medical care. If you suspect you have cancer you should consult your doctor as quickly as possible.

Ovacome cannot accept any liability for any inaccuracy in linked sources.

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