

Complementary and natural therapies for your child

Information for parents and families of a child
or young person with cancer





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We are grateful to all those who helped to make this booklet. The quotes in this publication are from parents, patients and carers. They are personal views and do not necessarily represent the view of CCLG. CCLG makes every effort to ensure that information provided is accurate and up-to-date at time of printing. We do not accept responsibility for information provided by third parties, including those referred to or signposted to in this publication. Information in this publication should be used to supplement appropriate professional or other advice specific to your circumstances.

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This leaflet is for parents who are interested in finding out more about how complementary and natural therapies can help their child to cope with the side effects of cancer and its treatment.

Complementary therapies are a collection of different approaches used alongside medical cancer treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and biological therapy.

Choosing complementary therapy

Being in hospital and having treatment is scary and children and teenagers can become stressed and anxious. Complementary therapies can play a part in supporting children through treatment by offering relaxation and calmness.

Complementary therapies are used **alongside** a patient's standard medical treatment. They do not treat or cure cancer but can offer relief from symptoms and help promote feelings of emotional and physical wellbeing.

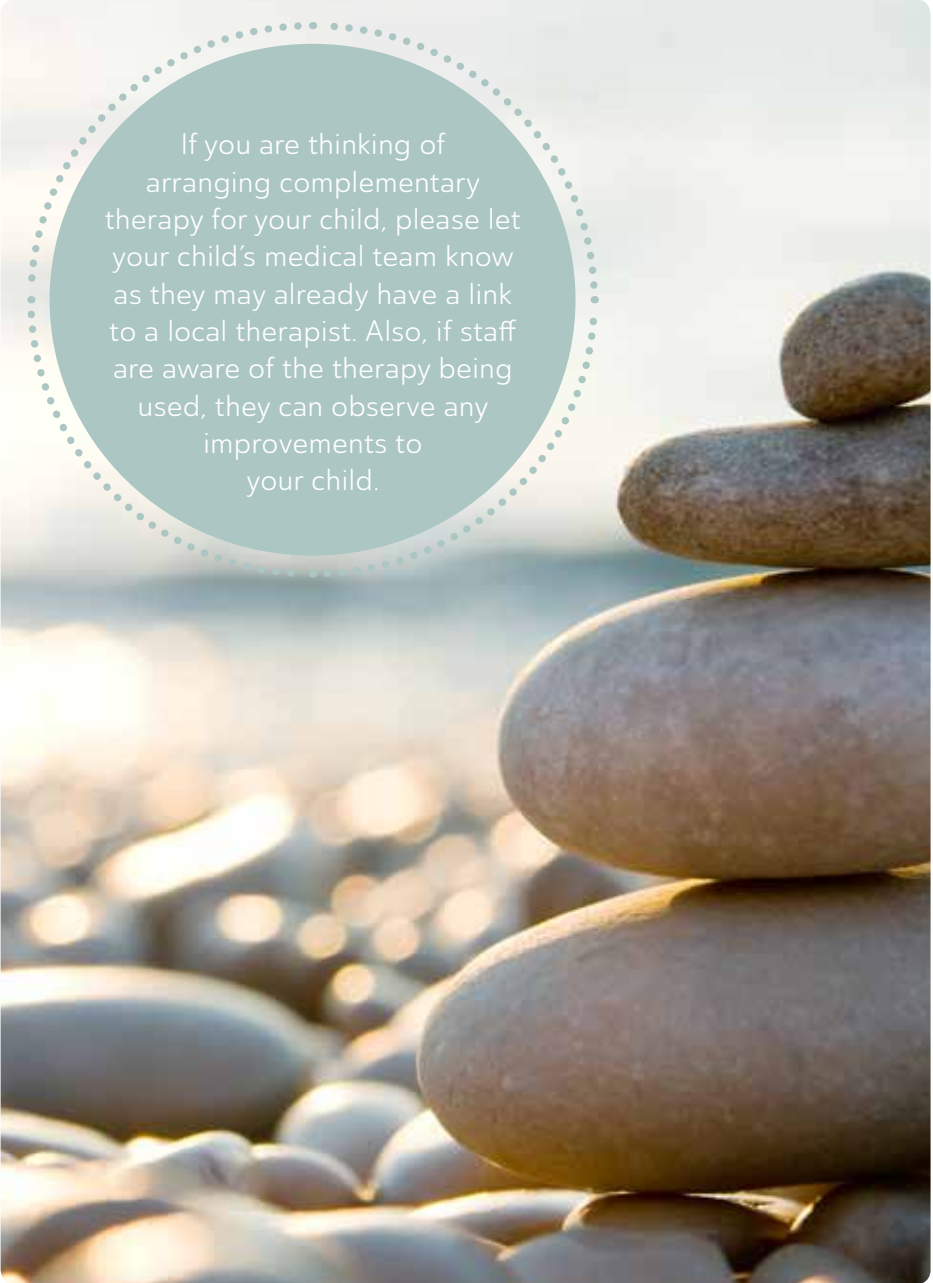
Complementary therapies can be used to:

- help children cope with the side effects of cancer treatments such as feeling sick, pain and tiredness
- help children to comfort themselves and ease the fear and stress of a cancer diagnosis
- help parents to feel they are doing something to help with their child's care
- help children sleep better
- trigger the release of feel-good hormones to help children feel better and more peaceful

Complementary therapies can also allow your child to escape the world of cancer and invasive procedures by offering a safe environment to relax.

“Complementary therapy can help children feel valued and special.”

Complementary therapy nurse specialist



If you are thinking of arranging complementary therapy for your child, please let your child's medical team know as they may already have a link to a local therapist. Also, if staff are aware of the therapy being used, they can observe any improvements to your child.

Finding a complementary therapist

Complementary therapy for children is not as readily available as it is for adults so finding an experienced practitioner may take a little time.

Within NHS hospitals - A free complementary therapy service may be available within your child's main treatment centre or local shared care centre. Your child's nurse specialist or keyworker will be able to tell you more about what is available.

Cancer support centres, hospices and charities - Your hospital's information centre may have local information on what might be available. You can also ask your GP, hospice, local support services and local voluntary organisations who may offer free complementary therapies.

Private sessions - You can also search locally for private therapists but a cost will be involved. It is a good idea to check the credentials of the therapist to ensure they have received the correct training and have experience of working with cancer patients.

In the UK, complementary therapists are not regulated by law, however the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) was set up with government support to protect the public by providing a UK voluntary register of complementary therapists for selected therapies (see www.cnhc.org.uk).

Attending a complementary therapy session

Depending on your child's age, you or another family member may accompany your child to the session. At the first appointment, the therapist will talk about your child's illness and discuss what treatment would suit your child. You may also be asked to sign a consent form. Dignity and confidentiality should be maintained at all times.

Types of complementary and natural therapies

The side effects of cancer treatment can be varied and may include muscle pain, constipation and nerve pain so it is important any therapist understands and adapts to the needs of your child.

Radiotherapy and some chemotherapy drugs can affect your child's skin, making it very sensitive, so it is advisable to use only plain base oil or your child's prescribed skin care creams rather than essential oils or perfumed creams.

Acupuncture

Western medical acupuncture is an adaptation of Chinese acupuncture and is used by conventional healthcare practitioners. The therapist inserts very fine needles into the skin at various points of the body which stimulates the nerves to release feel-good hormones. This may help with side effects such as sickness and may also help with pain, breathlessness and a dry mouth. Acupuncture is perfectly safe even if your child has a low platelet count.



Aromatherapy

This is the use of essential oils to help cope better with everyday stresses and emotional wellbeing. Aromatherapy uses concentrated oils taken from plants and flowers to help stimulate the sense of smell. They can be mixed with a base oil to be used in massage, added to a bath, inhaled, evaporated using an oil burner or blended with a lotion to be applied to the skin.

Allowing your child to choose their own essential oils will help them to get the most out of aromatherapy. It can promote healing and relaxation of the body, mind and emotions. The most common essential oils used to treat children are chamomile, lavender or citrus oils and a low 1% or less dilution dose is usually used. Some children with cancer find their sense of smell can be affected by treatment so aromatherapy would not be appropriate in these cases.

Art therapy

Art therapy can help children to express confusing and distressing thoughts and feelings through creative fun activities such as colouring, drawing and painting.



Massage

This is the use of gentle, relaxing and rhythmic touch techniques to work on the body's muscles and joints using an oil or cream. Tension can build up within the body resulting in a stiff neck, aching shoulders, headache and even eyestrain.

“Everything hurts and I get so fed up of everything hurting. When I have a massage it makes me forget for a while. Sometimes I fall asleep and stay asleep for hours after so I have to get my dad to wake me up.”

12-year-old patient

“I wasn't sure he would like massage but he loves it! He gets so upset about being in hospital and sometimes he gets angry with us, even with the nurses; that's really hard as he always used to be so easy going. Massages make him really calm and it's lovely to see him relax. He asks me to massage him if he has pain at home now. I would never have thought of it but it's so nice being able to do something that makes him feel better.”

Mum of 7-year-old son

Massage helps to soothe tension and stiffness by improving the flow of lymph fluid and blood around the body to promote a feeling of overall wellbeing. It is useful in calming children and helping them to sleep better. Massage for children should be extremely gentle with very little pressure. As aromatherapy massage oils can be too strong for children, hypoallergenic and unperfumed creams are usually used particularly for hands, feet and face.

Baby massage

Massage may give relief to your baby from the discomforts of colic, constipation, muscle pain and congestion. It can also help you to read and respond to your baby's non-verbal communications.

Music therapy

Music therapy uses music and sound to help improve emotional wellbeing and relieve stress. It is also fun and engaging for children.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques offer simple and easy ways to help your child to relax and reduce stress and you can try these at home. These include:

- **Deep breathing exercises** – there are many apps and online resources to help with this
- **Using imagination** to create a peaceful environment such as playing on a beach or hearing the sound of the sea
- **Mindfulness** – focusing on the present moment so you become more aware of the sights, smells, sounds and tastes that are around you at any one time which can help to reduce stress and anxiety. 'Mindfulness' colouring books for both adults and children are now widely available and can help to calm the mind and occupy the hands with repetitive motion to create a state of peace. It can also help children to release bottled up emotions and become less anxious.

Reflexology

Reflexology uses manual pressure applied to specific areas, or zones, of the feet (and sometimes the hands) that are believed to correspond to other areas or organs of the body, in order to relieve stress and prevent and treat illness.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnosis can be used to help reduce some side effects of cancer treatment such as sickness and pain. It can help to create a deep state of relaxation so that your mind is more open to accept new ways of dealing with fear and anxiety.

“Within a couple of weeks of having hypnotherapy, Cai’s fear of needles began to change and he is now able to be more relaxed before procedures. He still sees the hypnotherapist every fortnight to help keep on top of the anxiety and to give him ‘time out’ just to relax and escape reality for an hour.”

Mum of 8-year-old son

Energy healing (Reiki)

Energy healing is a technique which involves the therapist placing their hands gently on, or over, the patient. The therapist believes energy from their own body is transferred through their palms to the patient being treated so that the body can naturally heal itself and restore balance. It is gentle enough for everyone including babies.

“As a parent myself, I know how important it is to feel like you are able to do something practical to help your child, and when another injection is imminent or the dreaded lumbar puncture draws near, simply hugging your child or holding their hand with the addition of a little healing energy is pure magic!”

Energy healer

Herbal and vitamin supplements

You may come across advertising, sales and media claims that specific herbal and vitamin supplements can help patients with cancer. However, they are usually expensive, are not proven to help and may even be dangerous.

Some herbs, vitamins and other plant products can interfere with the medicines your child is taking so they can become less effective or increase the risk of bleeding or side effects. Supplements are only needed if your child has a known deficiency (for example, vitamin D) when they will be prescribed. Your child's doctor will want to know more about a particular herbal remedy before agreeing your child can take it to ensure it isn't harmful.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is the use of highly diluted plant and mineral extracts. There is no scientific evidence that homeopathy works and current NHS clinical guidelines do not recommend it is used for any health condition.

“Even vitamins like A, C and E in excess can cause harm by interacting with chemotherapy or radiotherapy and should be avoided.”

A natural product does not mean a safe product. While many modern medicines are derived from plants, so are other substances including poisons.





Nutritional therapy

Nutritional therapists believe that diet influences the body to maintain balance, promote health and protect against disease. Therapists are regulated on a voluntary basis and will normally charge for advice and products. Practitioners may recommend nutrition and lifestyle programmes although these are never as a replacement for medical and dietetic advice. Often, the suggested supplements are herbal-based which may cause problems for your child (see page 12).

Your child's medical team will include a specialist paediatric dietitian who will know your child's treatment plan and will therefore be able to answer any specific questions about diet and nutrition. They will also be able to provide free, evidence-based personalised nutrition plans for your child. Dietitians are regulated by the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC).

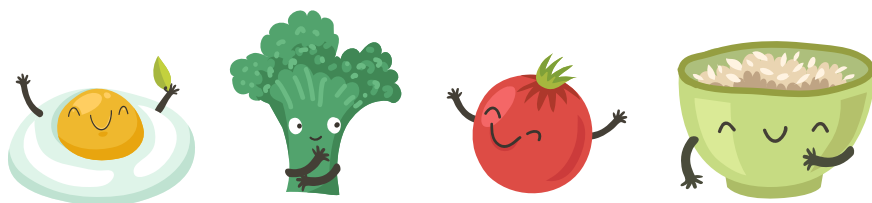
A nutritionist does not have the same qualifications as a dietitian. Dietitians working in teams looking after children with cancer are highly specialist and are an important part of your child's treatment team.

Alternative diets

There are a number of diets that claim to treat cancer, for example, macrobiotic diets, sugar-free diets, diets that claim to reduce acid levels and increasing vitamin and mineral intakes.

However, there is no medical evidence such diets can cure or help patients with cancer and some can even interfere with medical treatment.

Eating well is essential for children undergoing treatment for cancer to make sure they maintain a balanced diet and do not miss out on important nutrients or calories. It is important to talk to your child's doctor before starting your child on a new diet or nutrition plan so they can advise on any likely effects it may have on your child's medical treatment.



Sometimes parents are afraid their child's doctor won't understand or approve. However, doctors want the best for their patients and are willing to work with families. They just want to make sure any therapy or additional supplement is safe for your child.

Always talk to your doctor before trying anything new. This will help ensure nothing gets in the way of your child's cancer treatment.

Other sources of information

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancers-in-general/treatment/complementary-alternative-therapies

Information about what these therapies are, how they are used, current research in this area, and individual therapies in adult cancer care.

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/complementary-therapies

Information on the types of complementary therapies available in adult cancer care.

NHS

www.nhs.uk/livewell/complementary-alternative-medicine/pages/complementary-alternative-medicines.aspx

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Specific organisations

Association of Reflexologists - aor.org.uk

British Acupuncture Council - acupuncture.org.uk

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

British Association of Art Therapists - baat.org

British Association of Music Therapists - bamt.org

British Association of Nutritional Therapy - bant.org.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) - bacp.co.uk

British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA) - bcma.co.uk

British Dietetic Association (BDA) - bda.uk.com

British Reflexology Association - britreflex.co.uk

British Society of Clinical and Academic Hypnosis - bscah.com

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) - cnhc.org.uk

Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT) - findatherapist.fht.org.uk

The Council for Soft Tissue Therapies - gcmt.org.uk

International Federation of Professional Aromatherapists (IFPA) - ifparoma.org

Maggie's Centres - maggiescentres.org



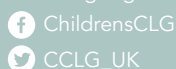
Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group is a leading children's cancer charity and the UK and Ireland's professional association for those involved in the treatment and care of children with cancer. Each week in the UK and Ireland, more than 30 children are diagnosed with cancer.

We bring together childhood cancer professionals to ensure all children receive the best possible treatment and care. We fund and support research into childhood cancers, and we help young patients and their families with our expert, high quality and award-winning information resources.

If you have any comments on this booklet, please contact us. CCLG publications on a variety of topics related to children's cancer are available to order or download free of charge from our website.

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