

Asthma and Complementary Therapies

An evidence-based guide

5



Contents

What is asthma?	1
What are complementary therapies?	2
Why should I consult a healthcare professional about complementary therapies?	3
Regulations for complementary therapies and therapists	5
Things to think about or ask before seeing a complementary therapist	6
Evidence about common complementary therapies for asthma	7
Further information	17

What is asthma?

Asthma is a disease in which the airways (breathing passages) tend to narrow too easily and too much in response to a wide range of triggers. Asthma symptoms include wheezing, chest tightness, difficulty in breathing, shortness of breath, and sometimes cough.

Asthma is a treatable health condition. Although at present there is no cure, with good management most people with asthma can lead normal, active lives. It is important to be assessed and cared for by a doctor with a good knowledge of current asthma management.

What are complementary therapies?

A complementary therapy is a therapy, including medicinal products, which is not considered to be part of current standard medical care. It is not limited to treatments and medicines but includes a range of different philosophies about how and why disease occurs. Complementary therapies are sometimes called 'alternative therapies'.

In recent years there has been increasing use of complementary therapies for the treatment of many conditions, including asthma. There are many reasons why people might choose to use complementary therapies. For example, they may not be happy with Western medicine or may see complementary therapies as 'safe and natural'. Some people feel that using complementary therapies gives them more control over their treatment.

Whatever the reason for using a complementary therapy for the treatment of asthma, the decision should be based on accurate information and informed, objective opinion – and made in consultation with your doctor. Overall, there is less information available about the safety and effectiveness of complementary therapies than is available about pharmaceutical treatments (medicines). However, we are learning more about complementary therapies and information is increasing and constantly being updated. Helpful resources have been listed in this brochure, as well as a summary of the available information about some therapies.

Why should I consult a healthcare professional about complementary therapies?

Discussing your treatment options for asthma openly with members of your healthcare team will assist you to optimise your asthma management. If you would like to try a complementary therapy, talk to your doctor first about what aspect of your asthma you hope to improve, and how you can measure if the therapy is helping.

Your doctor can assist you in:

- assessing whether the complementary therapy has improved your asthma by reviewing (before, during and perhaps after use of the therapy) such things as:
 - your lung function (breathing capacity)
 - changes in your symptoms
 - changes in the amount of reliever medication you use.
- maximising the potential benefit of any complementary therapy by providing you with information about:
 - possible interactions with medicines you are taking
 - the types of therapies that have been shown to have positive health benefits in people with asthma
 - any complementary medicines that may worsen asthma, such as Royal Jelly, Echinacea or products containing natural aspirin, such as willow bark.

As with any asthma treatment, it is wise to try a complementary therapy for a set period. After this time its benefit can be assessed and you can make a clear decision to stop or continue the therapy.

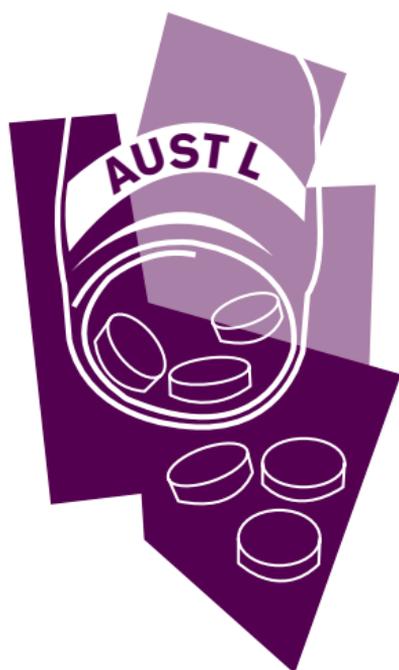
It is also extremely important that you do not stop taking your regular asthma preventer medicines without discussing this first with your doctor. Stopping preventer medications suddenly can be dangerous for people with asthma.



Regulations for complementary therapies and therapists

In Victoria, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners must be registered with the Chinese Medicine Registration Board. Osteopaths and chiropractors are also registered in many States and Territories. There are no regulations for practitioners of other complementary therapies.

Medicines used in complementary therapies are subject to Commonwealth regulations. Most complementary medicines are 'listed' (AUST L) products. Their claims are limited to 'assist' rather than 'treat' minor self-limiting conditions or for 'maintaining health' or reducing risk of non-serious conditions.



Things to think about or ask before seeing a complementary therapist

The following suggestions* may help you to select a complementary therapist to suit your needs:

- What experience have they had in treating people with asthma?
- Do they have professional registration? Who with?
- What exactly is the therapy?
- What period of treatment is likely to be required before we can tell if it has helped?
- What is the cost per session, and what is the likely total cost?
- What evidence is there that the treatment proposed actually works?

* Source: Osman LM "...advising patients about complementary therapies".
The Asthma Journal, March 2001, 6:50.

Evidence about common complementary therapies for asthma

A panel of experts compiled the table below from a review of published clinical trials of complementary therapies used for people with asthma.

The expert panel considered the effectiveness of complementary therapies on:

- 1 asthma symptoms (including measures of quality of life and other subjective measures of asthma control);
- 2 breathing capacity; and
- 3 level or quantity of medication required to control asthma.

In many cases the panel concluded that there was insufficient evidence to decide whether the therapy was likely to be effective, or that the available evidence was inconsistent. In other cases there was some evidence that the treatment was effective or, alternatively, that the treatment was ineffective. However, often the available evidence was fairly weak or there was conflicting evidence. Therefore, the panel classified treatments as either “possibly” or “probably” effective (or ineffective). Some of the findings are summarised in the following table. More information may be available from your doctor, the National Prescribing Service Medicines Line or other contacts at the end of this brochure.

Complementary approaches to treatment include more than just the treatments. A number of tests are also used, often to measure toxins or bodily attributes. In many cases these have not been standardised or validated in the way other medical tests have been. Consumers should seek advice about the meaning of complementary test results. These have not been reviewed in this brochure.



Therapy

Diet modification

- Omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil)
- Selenium supplements
- Vitamin C supplementation
- Vitamin C and E supplementation combined
- Oral magnesium supplements
- Lactobacillus acidophilus
- Dietary salt

Physical therapies

- Chiropractic
- Massage
- Swimming
- Physical training

Homeopathy

- Remedies derived from plants and minerals, given in extremely diluted forms according to individual patient needs

Panel's findings

Selenium supplements and magnesium supplements (in people who were deficient in magnesium) were thought to be possibly effective in improving symptoms, but not breathing capacity, in people with asthma. Of the others, on current evidence omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil) are probably ineffective as treatment for asthma and lactobacillus is possibly ineffective. There was no consistent evidence about the others.

Please note: At high doses, some vitamin and mineral supplements may cause side effects such as foetal abnormalities and toxic effects.

Please check the supplement with your doctor or pharmacist.

There is also a brochure on Asthma and Diet in Early Childhood in this range of brochures.

Chiropractic is probably ineffective for asthma and physical training is possibly ineffective. There is no consistent evidence about the effectiveness of the other treatments.

Possible beneficial effects shown for breathing capacity, and a reduction in medication required, but no clear evidence of effectiveness for asthma symptoms.

Please note: products should be carefully selected and preferably carry an AUST L number.

Therapy

Traditional Chinese and Japanese herbal medicines

Herbal medicines derived from plants or plant substances, usually prescribed on an individual basis

Traditional Ayurvedic (Indian) medicines

Herbal medicines derived from plants or plant substances, usually prescribed on an individual basis

Buteyko breathing technique

System of breathing exercises focusing on nasal route of breathing, hypoventilation and avoidance of deep breaths

Panel's findings

A number of specific therapies were reviewed. Several of these are possibly effective in improving breathing capacity in people with asthma. However, there is no evidence of beneficial effects on asthma symptoms or on the requirement for other asthma medication.

Please note: side effects and interactions with other medicines reported for some herbs. Please check herbal medicine with your doctor or pharmacist. Products should be carefully selected and preferably carry an AUST L or AUST R number.

Several of these therapies are possibly effective in improving breathing capacity in people with asthma and some are possibly effective in relieving asthma symptoms. One, *Tylophora indica*, is probably effective in reducing asthma symptoms.

Please note: side effects and interactions with other medicines reported for some herbs. Please check herbal medicine with your doctor or pharmacist. Products should be carefully selected and preferably carry an AUST L or AUST R number.

Short-term studies in adults show that it is probably effective in reducing asthma symptoms and reducing the amount of medication required. However, there is no evidence of effect on breathing capacity in people with asthma.

Therapy

Yoga

Ancient Indian practice using physical postures, discipline of breathing, and concentration during practice

Breathing exercises

Various techniques

Acupuncture

Laser or fine needles used to puncture the skin at defined points

Hypnotherapy

Creating a trance-like state

Ionisation

Instrumentally boosting the positive and negative ion content of the air

Meditation

Techniques used to calm the mind and body

Panel's findings

No consistent evidence of beneficial effects in people with asthma.

Possible beneficial effects on breathing capacity and medication requirement.

No evidence of effect on asthma symptoms.

No consistent evidence of beneficial effects in people with asthma.

Please note: some side effects have been reported. Care should be taken when selecting a therapist.

No consistent evidence of beneficial effects in people with asthma.

Probably ineffective in reducing asthma symptoms and the amount of medication required.

Please note: Ionisation has been reported to worsen exercise-induced asthma.

Possibly effective on breathing capacity for people with asthma.

No evidence of effects on asthma symptoms or medication requirement.

Therapy

Music therapy

Use of interactive music-making as a therapy to address individual emotional and developmental needs

Osteopathy

Physical manipulative therapy used to adjust misalignments of the muscles, joints and bones

Reflexology

Application of pressure, usually to the feet, to produce therapeutic effects on other parts of the body

Speleotherapy

A therapeutic measure which involves spending time in the pure underground air of caves or salt mines

Relaxation therapy

Techniques to reduce anxiety, tension and stress

Panel's findings

Possibly beneficial on asthma symptoms.

No evidence of benefit for breathing capacity or medication requirement.

No consistent evidence of beneficial effects in people with asthma.

Care should be taken when selecting a therapist.

No consistent evidence of beneficial effects in people with asthma.

Care should be taken when selecting a therapist.

Possible beneficial effects on breathing capacity and medication requirement.

Results achieved may vary from cave to cave.

Probably ineffective in reducing asthma symptoms and the amount of medication required. May be of benefit for those with asthma worsened by anxiety. Has also been demonstrated to be useful in acute attacks.

Further information

Asthma Foundations of Australia

For further information on asthma and consumer materials, contact your local Asthma Foundation on **1800 645 130** or visit their websites:

www.asthmaaustralia.org.au www.asthma.org.au
www.asthmansw.org.au www.asthmasa.org.au
www.asthmawa.org.au www.asthmatas.org.au
www.asthmant.org.au www.asthmaqld.org.au

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy

Reliable and up-to-date information on allergy and asthma: www.allergy.org.au

National Asthma Council

The National Asthma Council's website contains information and publications on asthma and has links to other asthma sites: www.NationalAsthma.org.au

National Prescribing Service Medicines Line

Independent information about medicines (prescribed, over-the-counter or complementary) for consumers on

Telephone **1300 888 763**

(Monday to Friday 9 am to 6 pm AEST)

Adverse Medicine Events Line

For consumer reporting or advice on side-effects, errors or 'near misses' with medicines (prescribed, over-the-counter or complementary)

Telephone **1300 134 237**

(Monday to Friday 9 am to 6 pm AEST)

Australian Government

Information on Australian Government initiatives on asthma: www.health.gov.au/pq/asthma

Information for consumers on various health issues including asthma: www.healthinsite.gov.au

© Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing 2005

Disclaimer

The information contained in this brochure has been expert reviewed and represents the available published literature at the time of review. It is not intended to replace professional medical advice. Any questions regarding a medical diagnosis or treatment should be referred to a medical practitioner.

This series on Asthma Topics for Consumers comprises eight separate titles:

- 1 Asthma and Allergy
- 2 Asthma and Lung Function Tests
- 3 Asthma and Pain Relievers
- 4 Asthma and Air Pollution
- 5 Asthma and Complementary Therapies**
- 6 Asthma and Infant Bedding
- 7 Asthma and Diet in Early Childhood
- 8 Asthma and Wheezing in the First Years of Life

To access these documents log on to:

www.NationalAsthma.org.au or contact

your local Asthma Foundation on **1800 645 130**.



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

