



Children's  
Cancer and  
Leukaemia  
Group

the EXPERTS  
in CHILDHOOD  
CANCER

# Complementary and natural therapies for your child

Practical information for parents and families of children and young people with cancer



[www.cclg.org.uk](http://www.cclg.org.uk)



## About this guide

This booklet has been written by experts to give you information about the types of complementary therapies you may consider for your child alongside medical treatment.



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## Choosing complementary therapy

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

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

They do not treat or cure cancer but can help children cope with the side effects of cancer and its treatment 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 and carers to feel they are doing something to help with their child's care
- help children sleep better
- promote the release of feel-good hormones to help children feel better and more relaxed
- allow children to escape the world of cancer and invasive procedures by offering a safe environment to relax

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 your team are aware of any 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 team 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 search locally for private therapists but a cost will be involved.

In the UK, complementary therapists are not regulated by law. However the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) was set up by the Government, to protect the public by providing a UK voluntary register of complementary health care practitioners (see [www.cnhc.org.uk](http://www.cnhc.org.uk)).

It is a good idea to check the credentials of any therapist to ensure they have received the correct training and have experience of working with cancer patients.

## 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 will 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 skincare 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 specific points of the body to stimulate nerves to release feel-good hormones. This may help with side effects such as sickness, pain, breathlessness and a dry mouth. Acupressure may be used as an alternative to acupuncture. This therapy uses techniques with few or no needles.



## Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils to help people cope better with everyday stress and emotional wellbeing. It can promote healing and relaxation of the body, mind and emotions. 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, evaporation using a diffuser or inhalation such as in a warm bath.

Allowing your child to choose their own essential oils will help them to get the most out of aromatherapy. Some common essential oils used to treat children are chamomile, lavender or citrus oils and a very low (1% or less) dilution dose is usually used. Some children with cancer find their sense of smell can be affected by treatment so it may be helpful to try a range of different smells, or you may find that aromatherapy is not appropriate.

## Creative therapy

Creative therapies (music, art, drama, play) can help children to express confusing and distressing thoughts or feelings through fun activities in a safe environment. These therapies can relieve stress and improve emotional wellbeing.

Some therapists will combine creative activities but there are also those who are trained in a specific therapy such as, play therapists, art therapists and music therapists.

This therapy is different to the play support that your child may have in hospital from a play specialist or play worker. It would need to be sourced and funded outside of the NHS.

It is important that you check the credentials of any therapist you are looking to use. Specialist therapists (art, music, play and drama) have had specific training and are regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). If you are looking for a therapist for your child, find someone who is listed on a Professional Standards Accredited register (see Specific organisations p15).

## Massage

Massage 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 eye strain.

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 for calming children and helping them to sleep better. Massage for children should be extremely gentle with very little pressure. Hypoallergenic and unperfumed creams are usually used, particularly for hands, feet and face.

**Baby massage** – A gentle massage may offer babies relief from common discomforts like colic, constipation, muscle pain and congestion. It also creates a special bonding moment, helping you to read and respond to your baby's non-verbal communications.



I get so fed up of everything hurting. When I have a massage it makes me forget for a while. Sometimes I fall asleep for hours after.

*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 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. It's so nice being able to do something that makes him feel better.

*Mum of 7-year-old boy*



## Reflexology

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

## 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
- **Imagination** – use this to create a peaceful environment such as playing on a beach or hearing the sound of the sea
- **Mindfulness** – focusing on the present moment to become more aware of the sights, smells, sounds and tastes that are around you can help to reduce stress and anxiety. ‘Mindfulness’ colouring books for both adults and children are 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.

## 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, his 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 boy*



## 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 see 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 for your child to take.

Some herbs, vitamins and other plant products can make the medicines your child is taking 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. Even vitamins like A, C and E in excess can cause harm by interacting with chemotherapy or radiotherapy and should be avoided.

**Before introducing any kind of herbal remedy,** it is important to discuss it with your child's doctor. They will want to check that it is safe to take and will not interfere with your child's current treatment.

## 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. It is essential that you discuss any complementary therapy you are considering with your child's team before starting it. Some things can affect how the body works or responds to treatment.

**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 p12).

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 looking after children with cancer, are highly specialised 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 ensure nothing gets in the way of your child's cancer treatment.**

## Other sources of information

### Cancer Research UK

[www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/treatment/complementary-alternative-therapies](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/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/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/complementary-therapies](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/complementary-therapies)

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

### NHS

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine)

Information about complementary therapies and the NHS

## Specific organisations

Association of Reflexologists - [www.aor.org.uk](http://www.aor.org.uk)

British Acupuncture Council - [www.acupuncture.org.uk](http://www.acupuncture.org.uk)

British Medical Acupuncture Society - [www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk](http://www.medical-acupuncture.co.uk)

British Association of Art Therapists - [www.baat.org](http://www.baat.org)

British Association of Music Therapists - [www.bamt.org](http://www.bamt.org)

British Association of Nutritional Therapy - [www.bant.org.uk](http://www.bant.org.uk)

British Association of Play Therapists - [www.bapt.info](http://www.bapt.info)

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) - [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA) - [www.bcma.co.uk](http://www.bcma.co.uk)

British Dietetic Association (BDA) - [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)

British Reflexology Association - [www.britreflex.co.uk](http://www.britreflex.co.uk)

British Society of Clinical and Academic Hypnosis - [www.bscah.com](http://www.bscah.com)

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) - [www.cnhc.org.uk](http://www.cnhc.org.uk)

Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT) - [www.fht.org.uk/findatherapist](http://www.fht.org.uk/findatherapist)

The Council for Soft Tissue Therapies - [www.gcmt.org.uk](http://www.gcmt.org.uk)

International Federation of Professional Aromatherapists (IFPA) - [www.ifparoma.org](http://www.ifparoma.org)

Maggie's Centres - [www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)





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**Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG) is a leading national charity and expert voice for all childhood cancers.**

Each week in the UK and Ireland, more than 30 children are diagnosed with cancer. Our network of dedicated professional members work together in treatment, care and research to help shape a future where all children with cancer survive and live happy, healthy and independent lives.

We fund and support innovative world-class research and collaborate, both nationally and internationally, to drive forward improvements. Our award-winning information resources help lessen the anxiety, stress and loneliness commonly felt by families, giving support throughout the cancer journey.

We want to make sure that our information resources are relevant and useful. It would help us if you could tell us what you think about this booklet by scanning this code to complete a short survey or contact us at [publications@cclg.org.uk](mailto:publications@cclg.org.uk).



CCLG publications on a variety of topics related to children's cancer are available to order or download free of charge from our website.

Publication of this booklet was funded by CCLG. If you would like to help, text **'CCLG'** to **70085** to donate **£3**. You may be charged for one text message at your network's standard or charity rate. CCLG (registered charity numbers 1182637 and SC049948) will receive 100% of your donation.

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