

## Reflexology, Aromatherapy and Acupuncture

Complementary therapies are not new – most of them have their origins in ancient traditions and sometimes even ancient civilisations. For many years, western medicine has been biased towards allopathic cures – the type of medicine that you would get on prescription from a GP or over the counter from a pharmacist.

In recent decades though, there has been a noticeable shift towards treating ailments naturally, without troubling the doctor or taking drugs to deal with minor illnesses. Complementary medicine has become more mainstream, and not just for ‘new age’ types. Some of the most accessible therapies are reflexology, aromatherapy and acupuncture.

### Reflexology

There’s no need to worry if you have ticklish feet, reflexology is not in the least bit ticklish, and in fact some people find it a very powerful remedy for many complaints, especially anything related to your hormones.

The underlying theory behind reflexology is that there are points on the feet and hands that correspond to different organs, glands, and other parts of the body. For example, anything relating to your heart and chest has a corresponding point on the ball of your foot, and a specific spot in the arch of the foot corresponds to your bladder.

Therapists help to remove blockages in the body’s energy pathways by putting pressure on the points on your feet that relate to the areas where you may be experiencing symptoms. You’ll usually be asked a series of questions about your background, health history, habits and lifestyle, then the therapist will clean your feet and start to apply a gentle pressure to specific points in your foot.

Sometimes you might feel a little discomfort as the therapist works on certain areas – that signifies that there is a blockage in that area, and usually corresponds to any particular problems that you might be having at the time.

In Denmark, it has been reported that regular reflexology treatments reduced absenteeism and sick leave in employees<sup>1</sup> – especially when they visited the reflexologist asking for stress relief.

Reflexology is non invasive, and although it doesn’t claim to cure diseases, it can have a high success rate in managing symptoms.

## **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is one of the most well-established complementary therapies in the UK, but also an ancient form of holistic therapy, which has its origins in traditional Chinese medicine. The therapy is based on the belief that vital energy (sometimes referred to as Qi) flows through the body via a network of channels, or meridians, under the skin.

Acupuncturists believe that if your Qi is out of balance, you can become ill. Acupuncture is designed to re-balance any areas in your body that are out of kilter, and help to stimulate the circulation of energy through the meridians in your body. Some experts believe that acupuncture actually works by stimulating the body to release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers.

If you have an acupuncture treatment, a therapist will insert very fine disposable needles into your body at specific points along these meridians, which should stimulate the flow of vital energy. If you're worried that having needles stuck into you might hurt – well it can be a little uncomfortable, although it tends to be uncomfortable in the areas that need the unblocking, much like reflexology. You might feel a tingle, or sometimes a dull ache. Other people feel nothing at all. Some therapists burn a herb called moxa during a treatment, which is said to help the effectiveness.

Trials have proved that acupuncture can be very effective in treating low back pain<sup>2</sup>, and it has long been used to treat asthma in China<sup>3</sup>.

Acupuncture is one of the top five complementary therapies, found by a 2003 House of Lords Select Committee on Complementary and Alternative Medicine to have the most evidence of effectiveness, the best professional organisations and top training standards.

## **Aromatherapy**

Contrary to what you might think, aromatherapy isn't just about burning lovely smelling oils – the practice covers using essential oils of herbs and plants in different therapeutic ways, including massage, inhalation and even topically.

Aromatherapy does not make any claims to cure illnesses, but it can help to relieve symptoms in a range of conditions. If you decide to treat yourself, you'll probably use oils that can be inhaled, either with a burner or a vaporiser, or added to bath water. Lavender and Tea Tree essential oils can also be used neat on the skin or added to a cream base to treat a variety of conditions such as acne or eczema, but it's advisable to test for any reaction on an inconspicuous area of skin first.

If you visit an aromatherapist, it's more than likely to be for a massage-based treatment. The therapist will ask you questions to help her decide which oils are best suited for you, and your particular needs, and then mix them into a carrier oil which dilutes the oils and makes them easier to massage with.

There have been studies which have looked into whether aromatherapy is an effective treatment for different ailments - some have looked at the outcomes of different oils and aromatherapy techniques on a variety of diseases and conditions, including the quality of life of people with cancer.

In 1998 a small UK study investigated the effects of aromatherapy in 58 cancer patients. Most of these were women with breast cancer who were suffering with feelings of stress, anxiety, depression and fear. Each patient had six aromatherapy treatments, and at the end of the study every single one of the patients showed a significant improvement in these negative feelings.<sup>4</sup>

## Summary

- Complementary therapies don't claim to cure illnesses but can help alleviate symptoms
- Reflexology involves stimulating energy flow through pressure points on the foot
- Acupuncture involves inserting needles into areas on the body to unblock energy flow.
- Acupuncture is one of the five major holistic therapies according to House of Lords Select Committee. (The others are chiropractic, herbal medicine, homoeopathy and osteopathy)
- Aromatherapy uses essential oils in massage and inhalation to help treat a wide range of symptoms.

## References

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3. McCarney RW, Brinkhaus B, Lasserson TJ, et al; Acupuncture for chronic asthma.; *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2004;(1):CD000008. [abstract]
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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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