

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES

FACT SHEET | AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS SOCIETY OF CANADA | SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DE LA SCLÉROSE LATÉRALE AMYOTROPHIQUE

The term “complementary therapies” describes a variety of non-medical treatments that are used in combination with conventional medicine in a holistic approach involving body, mind, and spirit that attempts to heal or to relieve the symptoms of disease. Many of these therapies have existed for hundreds and even thousands of years and are derived from cultures all over the world. Complementary therapies are not cures or meant to replace standard treatment. In many cases, people with ALS find that symptoms associated with the disease are more manageable when they use some of the techniques of complementary therapies. Meditation, hypnosis, acupuncture, massage, and other physical and mental therapies make day-to-day life more comfortable for people with the disease and also grant a degree of control over symptoms.

The therapies discussed here do not offer a cure for ALS, and are unlikely to alter the progression of the disease in any way. They are offered as a means to relieve and control symptoms and to make daily living more comfortable. Some of the physical and mental symptoms of ALS that may be relieved by the use of complementary therapies include joint stiffness, pain, nausea, constipation, sleeplessness, stress, anxiety, depression, and panic attacks.

Consult with your doctor before embarking upon an alternative course of treatment to ensure it does not conflict with any current standard treatment. A doctor may also be able to recommend a qualified therapist, as it is important to find a practitioner who is experienced and registered with an accredited organization before any therapy is undertaken.

Practitioners of complementary therapies should be aware of the clinical issues inherent in the treatment of a person with ALS. Factors such as poor communication, fatigue, edema, feeding tube issues, muscle spasms, pain, and breathing problems, especially in relation to some essential oils that may be contraindicated in the case of respiratory dysfunction must be considered.

Following is a description of some forms of complementary therapies that some people with ALS have found useful.

ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese medical technique of inserting and manipulating thin needles through the skin at specific points of the body to promote healing. Many studies have shown that acupuncture has an apparent beneficial effect on the human body, but none have definitively explained why this is so. Conditions affecting the muscles often respond well to acupuncture, as do pain, itching, constipation, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. People who use acupuncture claim that it leads to

increased vitality, greater confidence, elevated mood, better sleep, and a better appetite.

AROMATHERAPY

Aromatherapy is a form of therapy that uses oils extracted from aromatic plants to promote health and wellbeing. Essential oils are said to have a beneficial effect on the mind, body, and spirit. There are hundreds of essential oils listed in comprehensive guides to aromatherapy, but therapists commonly use a few dozen, with

specific oils used to treat specific ailments or complaints. It is important to use essential oils with caution as some oils may cause adverse reactions in some people, especially in the case of those with respiratory dysfunction.

HYPNOTHERAPY

Hypnotherapy is a form of therapy that uses the techniques of hypnosis in combination with psychoanalysis and counseling to promote healing and to change negative behaviour. Hypnosis is a state of induced deep relaxation that in theory allows the therapist to bypass the conscious mind and communicate directly with the subconscious mind. In this way, a skilled therapist can direct the participant away from harmful patterns and toward a more beneficial state of mind. Hypnotherapy can be effective in relieving sleep problems, fear, anxiety, stress, and panic.

MASSAGE

Massage is a physical therapy that uses pressure to the soft tissues of the body, including muscles, connective tissue, tendons, ligaments, and joints. Massage is used to relieve psychological stress, to manage pain, to improve circulation and to relieve tension. It is sometimes used in combination with aromatherapy. While massage is not contraindicated in the case of ALS, there may be complicating factors and it should only be used in consultation with a physician. Some commonly known types of massage are as follows.

Acupressure

Acupressure is a therapeutic technique said to predate acupuncture and that is a less intrusive method of stimulating the healing points of

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the body. Deep finger pressure is applied to specific points that are thought to correspond to the organs and glands of the body to remove blockages, increase energy flow, and stimulate good health.

Reflexology

Reflexology is an ancient Chinese technique that uses pressure points on the feet and sometimes the hands to promote relaxation, to stimulate vital organs, and to encourage healing in other parts of the body. This practice is based in the belief that all parts of the body are connected through the nervous system to the feet and that illness, stress, injury, or disease creates a state of imbalance and blocks vital energy pathways. The practice of reflexology can be helpful for problems with stress, constipation, tension, headaches, and poor circulation.

Reiki

Reiki is a form of “healing touch” in which the therapist’s hands are placed gently at specific positions on or above the body to channel energy through the body and to promote healing on physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.

Shiatsu

Shiatsu is a form of acupressure in which the therapist applies rhythmic pressure to specific points on the body using fingers, hands, elbows, and knees to stimulate a healing flow of energy. Shiatsu may include gentle stretching and manipulation of limbs.

MEDITATION

Relaxation techniques are an essential skill in the management of the anxiety and stress that afflicts not only people with ALS, but their caregivers as well.

Meditation is a form of conscious relaxation using breathing and focusing techniques. Through breathing exercises, the body is consciously relaxed, the mind becomes clear and focused, and the mood is elevated. Most religions use meditation or prayer techniques to achieve spiritual awareness, but the practice of mindfulness meditation need not be religion-based.

Health clinics and community centers may offer meditation classes, or those with mobility problems can usually find someone who will offer private sessions in the home. It is also possible to learn meditation techniques through the use of books, videos, compact discs, and tapes.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

on complementary therapies is available on the following web sites.

Alternative Medicine-Health Care Information Resources

<http://hsl.lib.mcmaster.ca/tomflem/altmed.html>

Friends of Alternative and Complementary Therapeutics Society

FACT is an Associate Member of the Canadian

Health Network, launched by Health Canada to provide reliable health information to all Canadians. It describes itself as a repository of health information that is “factual, accessible, credible, and ethical.”

<http://www.thefacts.org/>

The Canadian Complementary Medical Association

The CCMA is a network of Canadian physicians, residents and medical students with a special interest or expertise in complementary medicine whose aim is “to bring together the best of both conventional and alternative medicine.”

<http://www.ccmadoctors.ca/>

CAMline

CAMline is an “evidence-based” website on complementary and alternative medicine for healthcare professionals and the public, with a Canadian perspective.

<http://www.camline.org/>

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