

# Complementary therapies

Information and advice about the use of complementary therapies after an ovarian cancer diagnosis




**Target  
Ovarian  
Cancer**



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This information sheet aims to provide advice and signposting about the use of complementary therapies if you have received an ovarian cancer diagnosis. It explains what complementary therapies are and where you can find more information and support if you're thinking about using them alongside medical treatment.

## What are complementary therapies?

Complementary therapies are treatments carried out by trained practitioners which can be used **alongside and in addition to** conventional cancer treatments (such as surgery and chemotherapy). No complementary therapies should replace your medical treatment but some people use complementary therapies to help them relax or to ease symptoms and side effects alongside their conventional cancer treatment.

Complementary therapies don't claim to cure cancer. Some complementary therapies have been scientifically tested to check how effective and safe they are. Although research so far isn't strong enough to prove the benefits, there's some evidence that therapies may have the ability to improve sense of wellbeing and quality of life through a reduction in stress, anxiety, pain and nausea.

If you want to use complementary therapies alongside your cancer treatment it's really important that you use a professionally registered therapist and always keep your clinical team aware. You should also tell your complementary therapist about your cancer treatment so they can assess and advise which therapy would be most suitable for you during your treatment. This is because some therapies may interact with your conventional cancer treatments to make them work less well or increase the side effects. Most doctors will support you using a complementary therapy if they think it's safe for you.

## What are alternative therapies?

Often the terms **complementary therapy** and **alternative therapy** are used as if they mean the same thing. However, alternative therapies are generally used instead of conventional medical treatments.

Most alternative therapies haven't been through thorough trials so they may not be completely safe and could cause harm. There's some evidence to suggest that choosing alternative therapies **instead of** conventional cancer treatment has a negative impact on survival. Some alternative therapists may claim to be able to cure your cancer but there's no scientific or medical evidence to show that alternative therapies can cure cancer.

# What types of complementary therapies can I access?

There are many different complementary therapies which may be used alongside or after your hospital treatments to help you to relax or to ease symptoms and side effects. Some complementary therapies are common (like massage or acupuncture) and some you may not have heard of before. Some people find that these therapies may improve their mood and may help with different problems like feeling sick and pain.

Some of the common types of complementary therapies are:

- **Acupuncture** – this involves placing fine needles which are clean and free from bacteria (sterile) into the body at particular points. This is thought to stimulate the nerves. Acupuncture is used to help reduce symptoms of ovarian cancer such as pain. It can also help with side effects of some ovarian cancer drugs such as sickness and hot flushes. Western medical acupuncture is based on scientific research and can be used alongside conventional cancer treatments.
- **Aromatherapy** – this uses natural oils taken from plants (known as essential oils) to promote wellbeing and reduce stress. Some people use aromatherapy because it makes them feel good but more research is needed to learn how aromatherapy can help. Aromatherapy can be used alongside conventional cancer treatments but it's really important to find a qualified aromatherapist as some essential oils can cause skin irritation when used alongside some cancer drugs.
- **Massage therapy** – this is a form of structured touch that involves stroking, kneading, tapping or pressing the soft tissues of the body. It's promoted as a natural way to help people relax and cope with stress and pain. There are different types of massage and therapists may treat your whole body or concentrate on a specific part such as your shoulders or neck. Massage therapists working with people with cancer must be properly trained.
- **Reiki** – this means 'universal life energy' and is based on the idea that there's an energy that flows through all living things. Reiki therapists will put their hands on or slightly above your body and will seek to balance the energy fields in and around you by moving their hands across your body. Some people use Reiki to promote physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and it's safe to have Reiki alongside your ovarian cancer treatment.
- **Mindfulness** – this non-religious form of meditation helps you to be present and fully engaged in the moment. It can have benefits for your sense of wellbeing, help with stress and anxiety and can be practised at home. Mindfulness meditation courses are available locally in many areas. A lot of hospices and cancer support centres run mindfulness groups and training sessions.

- **Tai Chi** – this is a form of physical activity that mixes mental focus and breathing control. It's been described as moving meditation and centres around breathing exercises with a mix of motion and stillness. Some people use Tai Chi to help ease pain and stiff joints as regular practice improves flexibility, strength and balance.
- **Yoga** – this involves meditation and different postures to help with flexibility and relax your mind and body. Some people use yoga because it makes them feel good and helps them to cope with stress. Yoga can sometimes help you to move around more quickly and easily after surgery for ovarian cancer.
- **Reflexology** – this is an energy-based therapy based on the idea that different areas on the feet or hands are connected to different parts of the body. Gentle pressure is put on specific points on the feet or hands with the aim of making you feel more relaxed. Some people use reflexology to improve symptoms such as sickness and pain.

## Where can I access complementary therapies?

Most hospitals have links with a local cancer support centre which may offer a range of complementary therapies for free, or you may want to enquire at your local hospice about the services they offer. You can also speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) about complementary therapies as they will be happy to talk about these with you.



When I started having chemotherapy, my local cancer support centre offered me acupuncture which helped with nausea and being sick. I also had a course of Reiki which was really helpful. It made me feel calmer and less anxious. I still have Reiki three and a half years on and have done level 1 training myself. This has also supported me to meditate and use mindfulness. I feel I have helped my heart and soul while the doctors take care of my body."

**Julia**



## Where can I find out more?

- Cancer Research UK has detailed information about different types of complementary therapies on its website. Visit [cancerresearchuk.org](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org)
- Penny Brohn UK provides complementary care to people with cancer and their loved ones. Visit [pennybrohn.org.uk](https://www.pennybrohn.org.uk) or call **0303 3000 118**
- Maggie's centres offer care and support to people affected by cancer. Visit [maggies.org](https://www.maggies.org)
- The British Complementary Medicine Association (BCMA) has a database of therapists and therapy associations. Visit [bcma.co.uk](https://www.bcma.co.uk)
- The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) is the UK regulator for complementary healthcare practitioners. Visit [cnhc.org.uk](https://www.cnhc.org.uk) or call **020 3327 2720**
- The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) keep a register of health and care professionals who meet their standards for training, professional skills, behaviour and health. Visit [hcpc-uk.org](https://www.hcpc-uk.org) or call **0300 500 6184**
- The Research Council for Complementary Medicine collects and reviews research into the effectiveness of complementary therapies. Visit [rccm.org.uk](https://www.rccm.org.uk)
- The Complementary and Alternative Medicines in Cancer Consortium has reliable information on complementary and alternative medicines for cancer. Visit [cam-cancer.org](https://www.cam-cancer.org)
- The Therapy Directory puts people in touch with professionals who are qualified and suitable for their needs. Visit [therapy-directory.org.uk](https://www.therapy-directory.org.uk) or call **0333 325 2505**

## More support from Target Ovarian Cancer

- Target Ovarian Cancer's nurse-led support line offers confidential information, support and signposting for anyone with questions about ovarian cancer. You can call us on **0808 802 6000** (Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm) or visit [targetovariancancer.org.uk/supportline](https://www.targetovariancancer.org.uk/supportline)
- Our guides for anyone with ovarian cancer offer expert advice, practical information and emotional support on a wide range of issues at all stages. You can order or download your copies online for free at [targetovariancancer.org.uk/guides](https://www.targetovariancancer.org.uk/guides) or by calling **0808 802 6000**
- We run regular information and support events, including free online yoga sessions, as well as online communities where you can speak to others affected by ovarian cancer: [targetovariancancer.org.uk/support](https://www.targetovariancancer.org.uk/support)

**When you need information, friendly support or someone to talk to that understands, our specialist nurses are here.**

**Our support line is open 9am–5pm, Monday–Friday.**

**Call us on 0808 802 6000**



Get in touch for more information, support and signposting for anyone affected by ovarian cancer:



30 Angel Gate, London, EC1V 2PT



[@TargetOvarian](#)



[targetovariancancer.org.uk](http://targetovariancancer.org.uk)



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Patient Information Forum