

## Complementary therapies

There is a lot more to managing epilepsy than just seizure control. A good quality of life is important, and this is where complementary therapies can be most effective.

**Complementary therapies should not be seen as an alternative to drugs.**

For many people, stress, anxiety or lack of sleep can be a trigger for their seizures. Using complementary therapies to manage these triggers for seizures can have a positive impact on a person's overall wellbeing and could potentially help reduce the number of seizures. Many complementary therapies, such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, homeopathy, aromatherapy, osteopathy or hypnotherapy, have been successfully used for many years in managing these common trigger factors.

### Finding a reputable and qualified therapist

A reputable therapist who has undergone detailed training would know about epilepsy and the kind of treatments or remedies which are safe to use. They will never claim to be able to cure epilepsy and will never suggest stopping your medication.

Some therapists are covered by statutory regulations such as osteopaths or chiropractors. This means that members of these professions have undergone recognised training. Many long established therapies, such as homeopathy or herbal medicine, will have their own professional bodies ensuring their members' high standards of practice and training. You should always check your therapist is a member of a reputable professional body. Some therapies, however, may have no formal regulations or professional bodies, and this often makes it difficult to assess whether a therapist has had a high standard of training.

Before you see a complementary therapist, do your research. Keep an open mind but do not lose your sense of caution as the internet is full of claims of miracle cures for epilepsy. Ask around, get recommendations from someone you trust, speak to

the therapist first and make sure they know you have epilepsy and know which treatments are safe for you. Also make sure the therapist knows what to do should you have a seizure.

You may also want to speak with your doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse before embarking on complementary therapies. Doctors usually have limited knowledge about complementary therapies and may err on the side of caution when consulted about any of these therapies. There are sometimes good reasons for this caution as, for example, some herbal remedies or aromatherapy oils are known to trigger seizures or can make anti-epileptic drugs less effective.

**Whichever therapy you decide to use, never stop taking your anti-epileptic drugs.**

It is impossible to list all available complementary therapies, and the following is an overview of some of the therapies and issues relevant to those with epilepsy.

## Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils which are extracted from plants, chosen for a specific effect. Some are calming and relaxing and may help you manage your stress or anxiety levels. Other oils including hyssop, rosemary, sweet fennel, sage and wormwood can trigger seizures if you have epilepsy.

Aromatherapists are trained in massage, but may also suggest using the essential oils in other ways. A qualified aromatherapist should know which oils are safe to use for someone who has epilepsy.

## Massage

There are many different types of massage, such as Shiatsu or Indian head massage. Massage can help reduce muscle tension, help with sleep issues and reduce stress. Poor sleep and stress can sometimes be triggers for seizures, and a

massage, with or without aromatherapy oils, could help with overall seizure management. There is usually no restriction on massaging head and neck areas of a person with epilepsy.

Manipulative therapies such as osteopathy or chiropractic can achieve similar relaxing and calming effects which may help with seizure control.

Please note some types of massage can bring about a deep state of relaxation for some people. For a very few, this deep state of relaxation can be a seizure trigger. If this applies to you, then massage may not be suitable for you.

## Hypnotherapy

This therapy can help you feel more relaxed and confident in managing situations in your life and help bring about positive changes. Some people have taught themselves self-hypnosis techniques to bring about a state of relaxation whenever they feel stressed or anxious. This therapy is generally considered to be safe for people with epilepsy. Your therapist will appreciate finding out a bit more about the type of seizure(s) you have so they are prepared and know what to do should you have a seizure while under hypnosis.

As mentioned under 'massage', there is a very small minority of people with epilepsy who can have their seizures triggered by deep states of relaxation. If this is the case with you, then hypnotherapy may not be for you.

## Yoga and Meditation

Many people do meditation or yoga in order to unwind, or to become more mindful and reconnect with mind and body. This can bring about a feeling of wellbeing and calm and over time an improvement in your physical health. As with hypnotherapy and massage for the very small number of people whose seizures are triggered by deep states of relaxation, meditation may not be advisable. However, most people

who meditate will not necessarily get into a deep meditative state; this is something which is usually only achieved by very experienced meditators.

## **Nutritional and dietary therapies**

We are all advised to aim for a healthy and balanced diet, but this is even more important for someone with epilepsy. For example, an unhealthy diet consisting of processed foods and lacking in essential nutrients can affect the quality of your sleep. We know that tiredness and lack of sleep is a common trigger for seizures.

Some anti-epileptic drugs, especially when taken long term, can deplete nutrients in our bodies such as Vitamin D. There is also some anecdotal evidence that lack of certain vitamins and minerals may trigger seizures.

You should always seek medical advice before you take any supplements. You could create a further imbalance of nutrients if you simply buy supplements over the counter without specialist advice. In fact, there are some supplements that should be avoided as they have a known effect of triggering a seizure.

You may have heard about the ketogenic diet and the modified Atkins diet sometimes used for treatment of epilepsy. These are not complementary therapies. They are prescription only diets and need to be carefully supervised by a specialist. For further information, please see our separate factsheets.

## **Herbal medicine**

Herbal medicine has been used for thousands of years across many different cultures using extracts from plants to treat different health problems. They can have side effects just like man-made medicine.

A herbalist should never claim to be able to cure your epilepsy. Treatment tends to be on a holistic basis looking to restore the natural balance of the body. Herbal

medicine can often be effectively used to address possible seizure triggers such as stress or insomnia.

Never use herbal medicine without consulting a qualified medical herbalist. Herbs can be powerful and some may make it more likely to have a seizure or make anti-epileptic drugs less effective. Herbs to avoid usually include St John's Wort or sage.

## Acupuncture

This involves inserting fine needles into certain points of the body. As with herbal medicine, an acupuncturist should never claim to be able to cure epilepsy. There is some evidence that this therapy can be effective in reducing seizure triggers like stress and anxiety. Before you start treatment, alert the therapist to the possibility of you having a seizure. Inserting needles does not usually cause any pain or discomfort. If stress is, however, one of your triggers and you are anxious about the treatment, then this may not be suitable.

## Biofeedback

This therapy is also known as neurofeedback. It is a form of behaviour therapy where you can learn to have some control over your seizures. The therapist will train your brain over a series of sessions in a similar way to how people learn to ride a bike. This technique is used more widely in Germany and the USA and you may find it more difficult to find a qualified biofeedback therapist in Scotland.

This therapy requires detailed input and training. The fact that it is not widely used in Scotland means you will encounter a lack of knowledge among medical professionals.