

The following article is an excerpt from the booklet *Complementary Therapies and Parkinson's Disease*, published by the Parkinson's Disease Society (UK).

Unfortunately, there has not been a great deal of research into complementary therapies to date.

When looking into complementary therapies you may find some therapies state there is research proving their benefits. This may well be the case.

However, it is important to be aware that there are different views on what qualifies as 'good research evidence'. When claims such as 'research has shown a therapy to be beneficial' are made, you need to check the basis on which these claims are made. Even where plenty of references are given to back up claims, it does not always mean that the studies being referenced represent good, solid research.

The 'gold standard' for assessing new medicines and other treatments is the randomised, controlled trial. This involves a treatment being compared to alternatives (such as standard treatments already used) or a dummy drug/treatment placebo). It also involves complicated statistical procedures and the allocation of eligible patients is done using a random process, often computer-based to maximise security.

Some will be allocated to the new treatment and some to the alternative or placebo. Trials are also blind to safeguard against bias. In a single-blind trial, patients do not know whether they are taking the new medicine or the placebo. In a double-blind trial, no one (the patient, doctor or people conducting the trial) knows what treatment each person is taking. The aim of this type of trial is to make the research as objective as possible.

If it is clear that the complementary therapy research you are investigating has taken place as a randomised, controlled trial, you can be more confident of the benefits it claims to have.

Some other questions you should ask are:

- Was the research carried out independently?
- Did it compare the treatment with other treatments, or no treatment, to monitor what improvements there might have been?
- What kind of study was it? Sometimes claims are made on the basis of laboratory studies that do not actually test treatments on humans.
- How many people were involved? Small studies can produce interesting findings. However, sometimes claims are made for benefits that have only been helpful for a handful of people.
- What does the research measure?
- How recent is the research?

The Research Council for Complementary Medicine website provides a good guide to research in general including the different types of research that take place and the criteria essential to make a research study valid. www.rccm.org.uk.

Points to remember

Tell your doctor you are considering trying a complementary therapy and discuss what you are hoping to gain from it. Some complementary therapies may be not advisable for people with Parkinson's or those with certain other conditions.

You should not abandon your prescribed drugs: complementary therapies work alongside, not instead of, orthodox medicine.

Unfortunately, some complementary therapy practitioners may advise otherwise but such advice is untrustworthy. Use therapists who are appropriately qualified and belong to a credible professional association or society. Ask the therapist for details of their training, clinical experience and insurance cover and ask to see proof of their qualifications. Any reputable practitioner will be happy to answer any questions you have.

Some complementary therapists might raise your hopes and promise a cure. At present there is no known cure for Parkinson's disease.

Read up on what you think you might gain from the therapy and discuss this with your therapist. Insist on a proper treatment plan and cost estimates. Some complementary therapies can be very expensive.

Monitor your progress as you go. Try to decide whether the complementary therapy is doing you any good, but do not expect immediate benefits or miracles.

Decide whether any benefits are worth the effort and expense.

Remember, you may experience no benefits. However, a person's response to a therapy is as individual as Parkinson's itself, and what works for one person may not work for another.

The complete booklet "Complementary Therapies and Parkinson's Disease" can be downloaded from the Parkinson's UK website: http://www.parkinsons.org.uk/advice/publications/treatments_and_therapies/complementary_therapies.aspx

This article was originally printed on pg. 7 of the Spring 2008 edition of 'Signpost', our member newsletter.

To see the complete newsletter click here:

www.parkinsonsvic.org.au/about-ps/publications.htm#signposts

For more information about Parkinson's and complementary therapies, or if you have any question in relation to Parkinson's, please contact Parkinson's Victoria.