



Complementary and alternative therapies

Explains what complementary and alternative therapies are, what they treat, how they are regulated, and how you can access them.

If you want to contact us with any feedback, email contact@mind.org.uk.

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What are complementary and alternative therapies?

Complementary and alternative therapies cover lots of different treatments. These include body-based therapies, meditation-based therapies and herbal remedies, among others.

The NHS offers some of these. Others are based on different ideas of healing and wellbeing than those we normally hear about in the UK.

See our page on [types of complementary and alternative therapies](#) for more information about some of the different types.

What's the difference between a 'complementary' and an 'alternative' therapy?

Whether a therapy is 'complementary' or 'alternative' will depend on how you use it as part of your treatment.

In general:

- **'Complementary'** describes treatments which you may use **alongside** other treatments.
- **'Alternative'** describes approaches that **replace** the treatments offered by your doctor.

One person might use a certain therapy as complementary alongside things like medication, while another person might use the same therapy as an alternative to medication.

There are some misconceptions about complementary and alternative therapies. Some people think they don't work properly, are a scam, or have no evidence behind them. This is not always true, but the lack of information and clinical research on them can make it difficult to know which ones might work for you.

“As advised by my doctor, I take an SSRI antidepressant every day, in conjunction with supplementing iron, B vitamins, no alcohol before my cycle and avoiding caffeine as much as possible.”

Why might I try them?

There are many reasons you might decide to try complementary or alternative therapies. For example:

- You don't want the treatment your doctor has offered, such as [psychiatric medication](#) or [talking therapies](#).
- You've already tried the treatments your doctor has offered and they haven't suited you. For example, you haven't found a psychiatric medication that works, or it's caused unwanted side effects.
- You're on a waiting list for treatment, but you need help to manage your symptoms right away.
- You want more options to try in addition to the treatments your doctor has offered.
- You don't agree with your doctor's approach and you want to take another approach to looking after your mental health.

Whatever your situation, if you have any worries about your mental health you can [seek advice from your GP](#).

“When I could no longer take SSRI antidepressants due to side effects, I tried St John's wort as an alternative. It's definitely helped with my depression and my mood has lifted quite a lot.”

Can they treat mental health problems?

Complementary and alternative therapies can be used as a treatment for both physical and mental health problems. Different therapies are used for different mental health problems.

In general, there is more research on these therapies for [sleep problems](#), [depression](#) and [anxiety](#). But there has been some research on how certain treatments might help other mental health problems.

Our page on [types of complementary and alternative therapies](#) has more information on what each treatment might help with.

“I noticed that a large part of my anxiety was down to the fact that I wasn't breathing properly. Yoga helped with this immensely.”

Do they work?

As with all therapies, different things work for different people.

There's not much clinical evidence for these therapies, so your GP isn't likely to prescribe them. But a lot of people do say they find them helpful in managing mental health symptoms, so in this sense they can work.

Some research into how they work suggests this could be showing the placebo effect. This is when we feel better after taking a remedy because we expect it to make us feel better. This effect can happen with sugar pills that have no active ingredients. But it can apply to other treatments as well, including prescription or over-the-counter medicines.

Whether or not a remedy has a clinical effect doesn't always matter – the outcome of feeling better can be very real and meaningful in our lives.

For more on the effectiveness of different therapies see our pages on:

- [types of complementary and alternative therapies](#)
- [herbal remedies](#).

“Exercise became a big part of my routine to keep anxiety at bay. Along with mindfulness techniques and medication.”

Are they safe?

Most complementary and alternative therapies are considered safe when provided by a trained and experienced practitioner.

However, there may be times when a certain therapy may carry higher risks for you, and would not be recommended. For example, if:

- you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- you are receiving any other treatments that could interfere with the therapy
- you have a physical or mental health problem that could be made worse by the therapy
- you are about to have surgery or another medical procedure.

Before you start any new treatment it is a good idea to **talk through any safety concerns with your doctor and your treatment provider**. This is especially important if you're already taking any kind of medication.

If you are considering taking a herbal remedy, see our information on [when herbal remedies might be unsuitable for you](#). Remember that your local pharmacist can also give you advice about prescription and over-the-counter medications.

How are they regulated?

There's no compulsory regulation for most complementary healthcare practitioners in England and Wales, so it is possible to practise without regulation.

However, there are several kinds of voluntary organisations that practitioners can choose to register with:

- The [Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#). The CNHC acts as a voluntary regulator for the sector. It publishes a list of registered therapies, and maintains a public register of practitioners who have signed up.
- [Professional associations for particular types of therapies](#). These are membership organisations which provide a range of benefits and services for practitioners, and

act in the interests of the profession. Most have their own codes of practice and registers of practitioners.

It's always a good idea to choose a therapist who is registered with a regulatory body or professional association. This means they have met the standards of practice and education required by that organisation.

For guidance on the regulation of herbal medicines, see our information on [how herbal remedies are licensed](#).

What else should I consider before starting a therapy?

Only you can decide whether a type of treatment feels right for you. But it might help you to think about:

- What do I want to get out of it – is it realistic?
- What does it cost – can I afford it?
- How long will it take – have I got enough time? Is it open-ended or time-limited?
- Will I have to travel?
- Have I got any health problems that would affect me being able to do the therapy?
- Am I receiving any other treatments that would affect me being able to do the therapy?
- Could this therapy be adapted to meet my needs?
- Would someone I trust be able to come along with me if I didn't feel comfortable going on my own?

Finding the right therapist

As with any kind of therapy, it's really important to find someone you feel confident and safe with. Whatever the kind of therapy or medicine they practise, if you don't like or trust that person you're less likely to have a positive experience.

As a good starting point, your practitioner should be able to give you straightforward answers to your questions about:

- what qualifications they have
- what professional bodies they're registered with
- their past experience of using the therapy for your specific problem

- what risks might be involved, and what you should do if you experience any negative effects
- what procedures they have in place for making a complaint
- proof of insurance
- any other concerns or questions you have about the therapy.

If you don't feel able to ask these questions of them beforehand it might help to write them down in an email, or ask someone you trust to come along to support you.

Where can I get complementary and alternative therapies?

To find a registered therapist you can:

- use the search tool on the [Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council website \(CNHC\)](#)
- look for a list of practitioners through an organisation who specialises in the particular therapy. You can find links to these organisations on our page on [types of complementary and alternative therapies](#).

You may also find a recommendation for a local therapist through:

- alternative therapy centres
- health spas
- your [local Mind branch](#)
- your GP practice
- your local community centre.

Can I get them through the NHS?

While there are some complementary and alternative therapies available through the NHS, you can't always get them for mental health problems.

This is because there is currently not enough evidence to show how effective they are for mental health, so the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#) – the organisation that produces guidelines on best practice in healthcare - cannot recommend them.

However, NICE does recommend that healthcare professionals take your values, thoughts and preferences into consideration when they are planning your treatment. This means that, while a treatment might not always be available on the NHS, **your doctor should still be able to talk to you about alternative options** and how they

might interact with other treatments, so that you can look for them outside the NHS if you want to.

To find out what the NHS is able to offer you locally, it's a good idea to [make a GP appointment](#) and ask your doctor directly.

What if they don't work for me?

Although some people find that complementary or alternative therapies can be helpful, not everyone does. If you've tried something and it hasn't helped, it's important not to blame yourself.

Managing a mental health problem can be really difficult, especially when you're not feeling well. It can take time and may not be straightforward. But many people find that when they find the right combination of treatments, self-care and support, it is possible to feel better.

See our pages on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) for other options you could explore.

Types of complementary and alternative therapies

In this section you'll find information about a wide range of different complementary and alternative therapies.

If you want to learn about a therapy that isn't listed here, ask your doctor if they have any information on that particular type of therapy and if it might be right for you.

A lot of the research that has been done on these therapies suggests they are most effective when used alongside [other treatments](#), rather than being enough on their own. Do not stop taking any medication or other treatment you have been prescribed without talking to your GP or healthcare professional first.

Safety information

Most complementary and alternative therapies are considered safe when done by a trained and experienced practitioner. However, there may be times that that a certain therapy carries higher risks for you.

For more on safety see our information on [are they safe, when a herbal remedy might be unsuitable for you](#) and [things to consider before starting a therapy](#).

Some treatments may impact your [fitness to drive](#). **Speak to your GP or pharmacist** about this if you're worried.

5-HTP (5-hydroxytryptophan)

What is it? 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) is something our bodies naturally produce to help them form serotonin (a brain chemical involved in our mood). 5-HTP can also be taken as a supplement you can buy in health food shops and some pharmacies.

What is it used for? [Depression](#) and sometimes [anxiety](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? The most common side effects are nausea, vomiting and headaches. However, taking too much 5-HTP or taking it with [antidepressants](#) can cause [serotonin syndrome](#). If you have [bipolar disorder](#) 5-HTP may also cause [mania or hypomania](#).

Does it work? Studies have shown that 5-HTP can work as well as [antidepressants](#) for some people. Some people may also feel the positive effects faster than with other antidepressants. However, more research needs to be done into the long term use of 5-HTP and not everyone finds it helpful. You should always speak to your GP or pharmacist before considering taking 5-HTP.

L-tryptophan

5-HTP is made in our bodies from the amino acid tryptophan. We can get tryptophan from the food we eat. L-Tryptophan is also available as a tablet that some people use for [depression](#).

However, L-Tryptophan has been linked to a very serious health condition called Eosinophilia-Myalgia Syndrome (EMS). EMS causes fatigue, muscle weakness and pain, skin changes and breathing problems. It **can be fatal** in some cases.

L-Tryptophan is still available in the UK, but only with a prescription. There have been no reports of people getting EMS when taking 5-HTP, but more research needs to be done.

Acupuncture

What is it? Acupuncture involves inserting very fine needles into specific parts of your body. This is believed to stimulate nerves and muscles which may release natural pain-relieving chemicals. It is practiced in both Western medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine.

What is it used for? [Depression](#), [anxiety](#) and [sleep](#). Acupuncture is often used to relieve chronic pain, which might be contributing to anxiety, sleep problems or low mood.

Are there side effects and is it safe? Sometimes people experience pain, bleeding or bruising where the needles puncture the skin. You should speak to your doctor before getting acupuncture if you are taking medication or have a health problem that impacts blood clotting, or if you have an allergy to certain metals. Acupuncture should be done by a professional, such as a doctor or registered practitioner.

Does it work? It is not clear whether acupuncture is helpful for mental health problems on their own, but some people find it useful in managing symptoms or as part of self-care. Acupuncture is recommended by the NHS for migraines and chronic pain, and some people with chronic pain find that acupuncture helps with their mental health.

Where can I find out more?

- [Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine \(ATCM\)](#)
- [British Acupuncture Council](#)
- [NHS information on acupuncture](#)

Alternative medical systems

What are they? There are some traditional treatments that take a different approach to healthcare than that taken by the NHS. These approaches include Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic Medicine, Siddha Medicine and Unani Medicine.

In some countries, these approaches are part of mainstream medical care. They often have different ideas to those found in UK healthcare about the causes of mental health problems, how to identify them and how to treat them. The treatments include other complementary and alternative therapies, such as [herbal remedies](#), [massage](#) and [acupuncture](#).

What are they used for? Alternative medical systems are used to treat a range of mental health problems.

Are there side effects and are they safe? These approaches involve a wide range of practices and treatments, which will have different side effects, and there can be risks in some treatments. You should speak to your practitioner or GP about these before deciding to have any treatment.

Do they work? Treatments in alternative medical systems have different amounts of evidence behind them. A lot of research on these practices is done in other countries and there is not always a good understanding of the theories behind them in the UK. However, some people find these approaches helpful, particularly if they are from a country where these practices are more common.

If your mental health problem is not getting better or is getting worse after using these treatments, it is important to [speak to your doctor](#).

Where can I find out more?

- [Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine \(ATCM\)](#)
- [Ayurvedic Professionals Association \(APA\)](#)

Aromatherapy

What is it? Aromatherapy uses essential oils (oils extracted from plants) for healing. It can also be combined with other treatments, such as [massage therapy](#). Some people use essential oils themselves, or products with essential oils such as candles.

What is it used for? Different essential oils are thought to be useful for different experiences. For example, lavender oil is commonly used for [relaxation](#) and [sleep](#). Other oils may be helpful for different experiences.

Are there side effects and is it safe? It is possible to experience allergies or reactions to the oils, so you should speak to the aromatherapist beforehand if you have concerns.

Does it work? Many people find aromatherapy helpful as part of a self-care routine or for managing symptoms alongside [other treatments](#). It is unlikely to be able to treat a mental health problem on its own.

Where can I find out more?

- [The Aromatherapy Council](#)
- [Therapy Directory](#)

“I like calming essential oils like lavender dotted about on soft furnishings and clothes.”

Cannabis-based medicines

What are they? Cannabis-based medicines cover a wide range of substances, including medical cannabis and cannabidiol oil (CBD oil).

Medical cannabis must be prescribed by a qualified healthcare professional. It is only prescribed for certain conditions, mainly for people recovering from chemotherapy, some types of epilepsy, and chronic pain.

CBD oil, on the other hand, is available to buy legally from health food shops and pharmacies. It does not contain large amounts of THC (the part of cannabis that makes you ‘high’). However, most CBD oils will contain a small amount of THC, and different brands will include different amounts.

What are they used for? [Depression](#), [anxiety](#) and [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

Are there side effects and are they safe? Medical cannabis can cause behaviour changes and [hallucinations](#), while CBD oil may cause fatigue and changes in appetite. Neither of these are recommended for those of us who experience [psychosis](#) or

have [schizophrenia](#), because THC can make symptoms worse. Possession of non-medical cannabis is [illegal in the UK](#).

Do they work? There is evidence to support that CBD oil and medical cannabis can be helpful for [anxiety](#), but there is still a lot we don't know about how it works. CBD products are all made differently, which means they might not all work for you. It's currently unlikely that you'll be able to get a prescription for medical cannabis for anxiety, unless no other treatments have worked.

Where can I find out more?

- [Food Standards Agency](#)
- [NHS information on medical cannabis and cannabis oils](#)
- [NICE guidance on cannabis-based medicines](#)
- [Talk to Frank](#)

Herbal remedies

Herbal remedies are substances that come from plants, which are used as a way of treating and preventing different health problems.

See our [guide to herbal remedies](#) for detailed information on these.

“I enjoy chamomile tea. I tend to drink it when stressed, anxious, or wanting to try wind down and relax. I do find it helps, because hot drinks are soothing. I really like the smell too, which feels comfy and helps me sleep.”

Homeopathy

What is it? Homeopathy involves using extremely diluted (watered down) natural substances to treat physical and mental health problems. Homeopaths believe that the more a substance is diluted, the more effective it will be.

What is it used for? Some people find that trying homeopathic remedies for [stress](#), [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) does make them feel better.

Are there side effects and is it safe? There are no major side effects associated with homeopathy, however there is a risk that if you chose this as your main or only treatment, your mental health problem might get worse. Some ingredients used in homeopathy can also interact with other medications.

Does it work? There has been a lot of research into homeopathy and there is no evidence to suggest that homeopathy can treat any health conditions. Some people find that they feel better while having homeopathy, but there is no evidence that homeopathy was the cause of this improvement.

The NHS no longer provides any homeopathic services because of this. If you are considering homeopathy, it is recommended that you also consider other treatments, as it is very unlikely to work on its own.

Where can I find out more?

- [Federation of Holistic Therapists \(FHT\)](#)
- [NHS information on homeopathy](#)
- [Society of Homeopaths](#)

Hypnotherapy

What is it? Hypnotherapy involves being put in a deeply relaxed state by a hypnotherapist. There are different types of hypnotherapy and different ways to be hypnotised. You should always be in full control under hypnosis, and your therapist should only use methods that you've agreed on and feel comfortable with.

What is it used for? Many people find it useful in managing symptoms of [anxiety](#), [phobias](#), [stress](#), [anger](#), [addictions](#), and [compulsions in obsessive-compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#). Some people find it helpful for [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#), but it is important that this is supported by a qualified professional and potentially [alongside other treatments](#), otherwise it can make your symptoms worse.

Are there side effects and is it safe? Hypnotherapy might not be suitable for you if you have a diagnosis of [personality disorder](#) or [psychosis](#) (it may make your symptoms worse), or if you are [due to be a witness at a trial](#).

Does it work? Hypnotherapists use hypnosis to help you change unwanted thoughts and behaviours. They do this by using suggestion and by supporting you to increase your self-awareness. It can be helpful for helping change behaviour, but not everyone feels comfortable being hypnotised, or finds that it works for them.

Where can I find out more?

- [Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#)
- [Federation of Holistic Therapists \(FHT\)](#)
- [National Hypnotherapy Society](#)
- [NHS information on hypnotherapy](#)

Light therapy

Light therapy uses a strong light to simulate sunlight and lift mood. For information on light therapy see our page on treatments for [seasonal affective disorder](#).

As well as being used for seasonal affective disorder, some evidence suggests it might also be helpful for [depression](#) and [depressive episodes in bipolar disorder](#) that happen during times of less sunlight.

“Using a light box wasn't perfect but the change was tangible. A real shift. I began to cope better with the dark days and didn't have the all-encompassing desire to get back into bed and stay there.”

Massage

What is it? Massage involves working on the soft tissue of your body to help with [relaxation](#), [wellbeing](#) and physical pain. There are lots of different types of massage therapy, such as Shiatsu, Indian head massage, sports massage and [aromatherapy](#) massage.

What is it used for? Massage is often used as a wellbeing or self-care practice, as well as for pain or muscle injuries. Some people also find massage helpful when their mental health problem is causing muscle tension, which can happen in [anxiety](#) or [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? Massage is generally a safe practice, but if you have an injury you should speak to your massage therapist beforehand.

Does it work? There is not much research on massage and mental health problems, but many people find it helpful in managing their wellbeing or as part of a self-care routine.

Where can I find out more?

- [Federation of Holistic Therapists \(FHT\)](#)
- [Therapy Directory](#)

“I like to unwind by turning everything off, closing my eyes and trying to focus on my breathing. Slowly removing the negative energy and thoughts from my day.”

Meditation

What is it? There are different types of mediation, but all aim to quieten your mind and put you into a state of calm, stillness and rest. Some types of meditation may involve [mindfulness](#) or a [spiritual element](#). There are many DVDs, apps, and free online videos that can teach you meditation exercises.

What is it used for? [Wellbeing](#), [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and [stress](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? Meditation is generally safe, however if you experience [dissociation](#) meditation might make your symptoms worse.

Does it work? There are mixed results in the research about meditation for mental health problems, but many people find it a helpful way of managing feelings of [stress](#) and [anxiety](#). Many people also use it alongside other treatments as a way of managing their mental health and [wellbeing](#) more generally.

Where can I find out more?

- [NHS meditation exercise](#)
- [Headspace](#)

“Meditation, exercise and yoga have all been helpful ways to regulate mood and reduce anxiety.”

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a meditation technique you can learn which involves noticing what's happening in the present moment, without judgement. It aims to help you improve self-awareness and cope better with difficult thoughts and feelings.

See our [mindfulness](#) pages for detailed information.

Reflexology

What is it? Reflexology is based on the idea that different points on your feet, hands, face and ears are linked to other parts of your body through your nervous system. During a typical session, a reflexologist will use their hands to apply gentle pressure to these points.

What is it used for? [Sleep](#), [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? Reflexology is generally safe and there are no serious side effects.

Does it work? Most mental health studies on reflexology are done on people that are also experiencing a long-term or chronic illness, such as cancer, or who are a carer. Reflexology has been found to be effective in managing [sleep](#), [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) in these studies, however not everyone finds that it works well for them.

Where can I find out more?

- [Association of Reflexologists](#)
- [Federation of Holistic Therapists \(FHT\)](#)

“I really like reflexology. It helped calm me when I was in a mixed state.”

Reiki

What is it? Reiki is a Japanese technique that involves practitioners rebalancing ‘energy flow’ over your body. Practitioners will either place their hands lightly on you or hover them above your body throughout the treatment.

What is it used for? Reiki is used for [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and other problems associated with chronic pain or illness.

Are there side effects and is it safe? There are no significant side effects associated with reiki.

Does it work? Some people find reiki a very relaxing treatment that helps with their mood. There are not many large research studies on reiki for mental health, but some studies suggest it can be helpful for people who have [anxiety](#) as a result of chronic pain.

Where can I find out more?

- [Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council \(CNHC\)](#)
- [Federation of Holistic Therapists \(FHT\)](#)
- [UK Reiki Federation](#)

SAMe (S-Adenosyl-Methionine)

What is it? SAMe is a chemical found naturally in the body that helps with serotonin, melatonin and dopamine levels, the brain chemicals that help with our mood. It is also known as ademetionine. You can take it as a tablet.

What is it used for? [Depression](#) and [anxiety](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? The most common side effects are stomach problems, insomnia, sweating, a dry mouth and dizziness. SAMe may interact with other medicines or dietary supplements. It may also worsen symptoms of [mania](#) in those of us with [bipolar disorder](#).

Does it work? SAMe has been shown to be as effective as [antidepressants](#) at treating [depression](#) in the short term, and many people say they feel it works faster than other antidepressants. Some people prefer SAMe to antidepressants because it has less side effects, but the long-term effects of SAMe are not well known and it does not work for everyone.

Where can I find out more?

- [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health \(NCCIH\)](#)

Spiritual and religious healing

What is it? Spiritual and religious healing refers to a wide range of practices that use faith or religious connection to treat a health condition. It can involve rituals, prayers, and religious or spiritual objects. It can also involve other complementary and alternative therapies, such as [meditation](#) and [yoga](#).

What is it used for? Spiritual and religious healing is used in different ways by different people and groups. Some feel it is a good form of general [wellbeing](#) support and self-care, while others might feel it can help to cure a health problem.

Are there side effects and is it safe? If the person leading the religious or spiritual healing practice has a good understanding of mental health problems and you are using it alongside [other treatments](#), it can be a helpful experience.

However, some research suggests that spiritual and religious healing can make you feel worse, if you are using it instead of other treatments that might work better for you. This is especially the case if you've experienced religious-based [trauma](#), or if you have [schizophrenia](#) or [psychosis](#).

Does it work? While there is not much evidence to support how spiritual and religious healing works, many people find that faith or spirituality can be an important part of supporting their [wellbeing](#).

Where can I find out more?

- [Royal College of Psychiatrists](#)
- [UK Healers](#)

“My way of coping is by praying, meditation and sound healing.”

St John's wort

St John's wort is a [herbal remedy](#). It is used to treat mild and moderate [depression](#). For detailed information see our page on [St John's wort](#).

“When I could no longer take SSRI's due to side effects, I tried St John's wort as an alternative. It 's definitely helped with my depression and my mood has lifted quite a lot.”

Tai chi

What is it? Tai chi (also called tai chi chuan) is a Chinese practice that uses deep breathing and relaxation with flowing movements to help with balance, movement and wellbeing. It is particularly useful for older adults or those of us with mobility restrictions, as it is very accessible for a range of movement levels.

What is it used for? Tai chi is often used as part of a general [wellbeing](#) practice, and some use it to help with [stress](#) and low mood.

Are there side effects and is it safe? Tai chi is a generally safe practice and has no significant side effects. You may need to take precautions however if you are pregnant, have a hernia, back pain or osteoporosis.

Does it work? Tai chi has been shown to be beneficial for low mood and general [wellbeing](#), as well as helping with physical conditions that may be contributing to your mental health problem.

Where can I find out more?

- [NHS information on tai chi](#)

Vitamin and mineral supplements

What are they? Vitamins and minerals are essential for our health and [wellbeing](#). You can get most essential vitamins and minerals from a balanced diet, but some of us take supplements if we have a deficiency or think it might help with a particular health problem.

What are they used for? Vitamins and minerals play an important role in our general health. Some mental health problems can be caused by a deficiency in vitamins and minerals, and taking supplements or increasing how many nutrients we get in our diet can help. There is also good evidence to suggest that taking omega-3 fatty acids alongside [mood stabilisers](#) can help if you're experiencing [depressive symptoms in bipolar disorder](#).

Are there side effects and are they safe? The vitamins and minerals you get in supplements can be found naturally in foods, and that is normally the best way to take them. Having too many supplements can be harmful to your health. If you are considering taking supplements, speak to a pharmacist or GP.

Do they work? Unless your mental health problem is caused by a vitamin or mineral deficiency, they are unlikely to be enough on their own to help your mental health problem. However, making sure you are getting your essential vitamins and minerals daily can improve your [wellbeing](#) and general health. Research also supports taking vitamin D during the winter if you live in the UK, and taking omega-3 fatty acid supplements to help with [depressive symptoms in bipolar disorder](#).

Where can I find out more?

- [NHS guide to vitamins and minerals](#)
- [NHS guide to assessing if you need vitamin supplements](#)

“I have found that vitamin D, regular exercise, healthy eating and a heated blanket helps with both mental and sleep issues.”

Weighted blankets

What are they? Weighted blankets are blankets that are lined or made with heavy materials, such as metal. They are used to apply deep pressure to the person wearing it. You can also get weighted clothing, such as jackets.

What are they used for? Weighted blankets are commonly used to relieve [anxiety](#). Some people find the pressure from the blankets to have a calming effect. For those of us with autism spectrum disorder, weighted blankets and clothing have been used as part of deep pressure therapy for a long time.

Are there side effects and are they safe? Weighted blankets are safe and there are no significant side effects. You may find them uncomfortable if you do not like physical touch or experience claustrophobia.

Do they work? Studies on weighted blankets for anxiety are relatively new, but they are positive. Many people find them helpful in managing their [anxiety symptoms](#) or [panic attacks](#).

“I’ve used a weighted blanket when I’m struggling with anxiety and it does really help. I think it tricks your mind into thinking someone is hugging you. Like you’re being taken care of.”

Yoga

What is it? Yoga involves spiritual and physical practices designed to increase self-awareness. These include posture work, breathing exercises, [meditation](#), sounds and visualisation. There are many different types of yoga that suit a range of fitness levels.

What is it used for? Many people use yoga as part of general self-care, but it can also be effective for [anxiety](#), [stress](#) and [depression](#).

Are there side effects and is it safe? Yoga is generally safe, with limited side effects when done correctly. It's a good idea to do at least a few classes with a professional instructor (in a group or individually) before trying it by yourself, because doing the poses incorrectly can potentially cause injuries. But once you feel safe and confident, there are many books, DVDs and free online resources available to guide you if you want to do yoga on your own.

Does it work? Research shows that many people find yoga beneficial to their mental health. In particular, it can be very effective in managing symptoms of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) when practised regularly and alongside [other treatments](#). However, some people with severe depression do not find it effective.

Where can I find out more?

- [Adaptive Yoga](#)
- [British Wheel of Yoga](#)
- [NHS guide to yoga](#)

“I find yoga very beneficial especially when slow moving as I feel more connection.”

What are herbal remedies?

Herbal remedies are substances that come from plants. They come in various forms, such as capsules, teas, liquid drops or skin creams. You can get them at health food shops, supermarkets, pharmacies and from [herbal practitioners](#).

Some may be referred to as 'supplements'. Others may be referred to as 'medicines', which means they aim to treat, cure or prevent a diagnosed health problem.

Often herbal remedies are part of [alternative approaches to healthcare](#), such as Ayurvedic medicine and Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

What are they used for and do they work?

There are lots of different types of herbal remedies that aim to help with different health conditions or help with your [wellbeing](#). Some of the most common ones in the UK are:

- chamomile, lavender or valerian remedies for [sleep](#) and [relaxation](#)
- [St John's wort](#) for [depression](#)
- chaste berry for [PMDD](#) and premenstrual syndrome.

Not all herbal remedies have been researched equally, and some have more scientific evidence to show how they work than others. However, many people find certain herbal remedies help them as part of self-care or managing symptoms.

“I enjoy chamomile tea. I tend to drink it when stressed, anxious, or wanting to try wind down and relax. I do find it helps, because hot drinks are soothing. I really like the smell too, which feels comfy and helps me sleep.”

How are they different from psychiatric drugs?

Unlike [psychiatric medication](#), most herbal remedies are:

- based on long-standing traditional use (not based on scientific research studies using clinical trials)
- available to buy over-the-counter without a doctor's prescription
- not typically offered by NHS doctors (because there is not enough reliable evidence that they are effective at treating mental health problems)
- licensed under a [different licensing scheme](#)
- occasionally [prepared 'bespoke'](#) (specifically for you based on your needs) by a [herbal practitioner](#).

“I like calming essential oils like lavender dotted about on soft furnishings and clothes.”

Are they safer to take than psychiatric drugs?

Some people assume that herbal remedies must be safer than psychiatric drugs, or less likely to cause side effects. But this is not necessarily true.

Herbal remedies can cause side effects and can interact with other drugs, just as prescription drugs can. If not prepared correctly, some may be toxic. So you should approach any kind of supplement or medication with equal caution (prescription and non-prescription), and make sure you have all the information you need to feel confident about your decision.

If you are in any doubt about whether a medication or herbal remedy is safe for you to take, seek advice from your GP or local pharmacist.

If you experience any side effects from herbal medicines, you can report these to the [Yellow Card scheme](#).

How are they licensed?

Products that contain herbal ingredients are licensed differently depending on whether they are considered a:

- herbal medicine, such as [St John's wort](#)
- food, such as some herbal teas
- cosmetic, such as skin creams that contain herbal ingredients.

[Bespoke herbal remedies](#), which are prepared by herbal practitioners, are not licensed.

Herbal medicines sold in supermarkets, pharmacists and health shops in the UK are licensed by the [Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency \(MHRA\)](#). Even though this is the same organisation that licenses other kinds of drugs, including [psychiatric medications](#), herbal medicines are covered by a different registration scheme. This is the Traditional Herbal Medicines (THR) Registration scheme.

Under this scheme, a medicine can be registered without going through clinical trials (like they would for prescription drugs). It just needs to show that it:

- has been used as a traditional medicine for a long time
- is only used to treat minor health conditions.

All licensed herbal medicines should be marked with the registration mark shown here:



This indicates that the herbal medicine is safe to an acceptable standard, provided it is used according to the instructions on the packaging. It should also have a registration number, starting with the letters 'THR'. You can find a list of [which herbal medicines have been licensed](#) on the Gov.uk website.

Some herbal ingredients are banned in the UK. You can find information on these on the [Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency \(MHRA\)](#) website.

When might they be unsuitable for me?

Although herbal remedies are easily available to buy without a prescription, some may not be suitable for you, or could be harmful. For example if you:

- have another physical or mental health problem which could be made worse by taking a herbal remedy, particularly a health condition that affects your kidneys or liver
- are pregnant or breastfeeding
- are taking any other medications, including [psychiatric medications](#), as they may interact badly
- are allergic to any of the ingredients
- take too much, or don't take them as instructed on the packaging
- are due to have surgery (some herbal remedies can interfere with anaesthetic)
- are [buying your medication online](#) (different countries have different rules on regulating herbal products and there are risks that the product could be fake, unlicensed or contaminated)
- take a remedy that is [not licensed](#) (for example, some unlicensed Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic herbal medicines contain toxic levels of mercury and lead).

“Plants and herbal remedies can be fantastic. Just check in with the pharmacy if you're taking medications to be sure they won't negatively impact medications you're taking.”

What is a herbal practitioner?

Herbal practitioners play an established role in herbal medicine, Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Ayurvedic medicine. But currently there are no rules around who can call themselves a herbal practitioner. You can practise without having any related experience or qualifications.

However, there are several voluntary registers which require certain standards of practice and education. So if you want to find a herbal practitioner, it's a good idea to find someone through one of these registers:

- [National Institute of Medical Herbalists \(NIMH\)](#)
- [British Herbal Medicine Association \(BHMA\)](#)

Bespoke herbal preparations

After holding a consultation with you, a herbal practitioner may make you their own herbal preparation to take. Typically these are made from different parts of plants,

minerals and sometimes metals. However, because these preparations are [not licensed](#) it's not possible to be sure what's in them, or in what dose.

It is important to discuss any concerns with your doctor, pharmacist or [herbal practitioner](#). For example, you might ask:

- what is in the preparation
- how it might make you feel
- what side effects you should expect
- what you should do if you experience side effects that you were not told about.

For more guidance see our pages on:

- [what to know before taking medication](#)
- [receiving the right medication for you](#)
- [coping with side effects](#)
- the [Yellow Card scheme](#) (for how to report side effects from any medication, including herbal remedies).

There is also some [NHS information on herbal medicines](#).

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References are available on request.