

Treatment Pathways: Complementary Therapies



Anti-seizure medication is the primary treatment for epilepsy, but 30% of people with epilepsy will not gain seizure-control with medication alone. In these cases, complementary therapies can help alleviate seizures when administered in addition to anti-seizure drugs.

Complementary therapies include acupuncture, chiropractic care, massage therapy, relaxation, guided imagery, biofeedback, aromatherapy, yoga, therapeutic touch, homeopathy and diet. These are unconventional or non-medical therapies that tend to focus on the integration of the body, mind and spirit, sometimes referred to as the holistic model.

TIP: Always consult with your health care provider before adding complementary therapies to your epilepsy treatment routine.

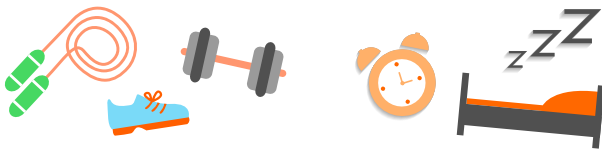
Chemicals, including herbs, can affect the way anti-seizure drugs work. Your health care provider can advise you about the impact of the complementary therapy on your medication as well as any safety precautions you should take when trying out other complementary therapies such as yoga.

Are complementary therapies effective in treating epilepsy?

There has not been much research looking into complementary therapies for epilepsy, so there is little scientific evidence of their effectiveness. However, some people who have tried complementary treatments have felt that these have helped their epilepsy and improved their quality of life.

Reducing stress can reduce seizures in some people, and complementary therapies that include stress-reduction techniques can help some people better control their seizures. Furthermore, the greater involvement of the person with epilepsy in his or her own seizure management through these therapies can be positive in itself.

Common Complementary Therapies Include:



Relaxation, Yoga, and Meditation

A person with epilepsy who finds that they have more seizures when under stress may benefit from learning stress management and relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and deep diaphragmatic breathing. Some people have found that yoga or meditation helps them prevent stress-induced seizures and improves their quality of life.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture, which is part of the traditional medicine of China, uses needles and sometimes heat to stimulate nerve endings. The goal is to bring the person's health into a better mental, physical and emotional balance. Acupuncture has been used in patients with epilepsy with mixed results.

Behaviour Therapy

In behavioural therapy, seizures are viewed as a kind of conditioned or learned (though not voluntary) response to environmental conditions. Behaviour modification strategies that have had some success in people with seizures involve rewards, reinforcement, auto suggestion, relaxation, desensitization and other conditioning strategies.

Aromatherapy

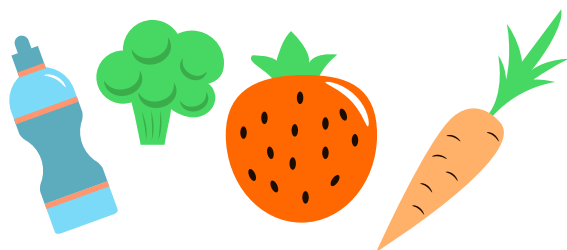
Aromatherapy uses pure aromatic oils from plants for stimulation and relaxation and to aid the healing process. Dr. Tim Betts, a British researcher, has had some success using oils on patients with epilepsy who can predict an imminent seizure. The idea is that the neuronal excitement in the brain that produces seizures can be altered, aborted or prevented by teaching a patient to change their state of arousal with the help of a particular aroma.

The use of oils such as ylang ylang, camomile and lavender appear to help relaxation. Oils like rosemary, sage, hyssop, sweet fennel and wormwood can have the opposite effect and should therefore be avoided by people with epilepsy.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback for epilepsy uses EEG machines to help people identify and alter their own seizure-related brain activity. The person with epilepsy is trained over time to use relaxation or other biofeedback techniques to generate a more normalized brain wave pattern, which may in turn reduce their seizures.

Ketogenic Diet



The ketogenic diet has been used successfully by some pediatric neurologists to control seizures in children with serious epilepsy that does not respond to conventional medical treatment, but it has not proven effective in adults. It is a high fat, adequate protein, low carbohydrate diet. Do not attempt the ketogenic diet without medical supervision from a properly trained ketogenic diet team especially if you are taking anti-seizure medications. For more information, see our Ketogenic Diet resource sheet.

TIP: If you are interested in trying out complementary therapies, consult the professional associations responsible for regulating alternative therapists, such as the Ontario Association of Naturopathic Doctors, to find out about a therapist's specialization and credentials. Look for someone who specializes in epilepsy.

TIP: It is critically important to tell your alternative therapists that you have epilepsy and what medications you are on.

Adapted from Epilepsy & The Facts: Alternative Therapies (Epilepsy Toronto) and Clinic 2 Community's Ketogenic Diet Resource Sheet.