

Complementary therapies for back pain – do they work?

You've been through every orthodox treatment for back pain and none has worked. The doctors say there's nothing more that they can do – but you can't help feeling that there must be something, somewhere, that will help.

Perhaps a complementary or alternative therapy is the answer? Many people who've tried them have found a real improvement in their condition, but not everyone finds the relief they are seeking. Just as orthodox approaches to back pain work for some people but not for others, so complementary and alternative approaches have successes and failures.

How can we tell what works?

There would be a huge outcry if doctors started prescribing treatments that were untested and unproven. The treatments prescribed by your GP or hospital doctor, especially drugs (and sometimes operations) have usually been tested in clinical trials. This means that they have been compared to either doing nothing, or using a sham treatment (called a placebo) or to the usual treatment. This is the very best way of finding if something is really helping, or if people would do just as well without it, or with a different treatment. Much less of this kind of research has been carried out in complementary and alternative therapies, so it's much harder to tell if they really work or not.

Because there isn't enough rigorous research into most complementary and alternative therapies, we have to rely on surveys of what people say worked for them. It isn't ideal, because we have no idea if something else would have worked better – or if they would have improved even if they'd had no treatment. Surveys can, however, allow us to compare which therapies people believe have helped them and which leave them less satisfied. BackCare recently conducted a survey among visitors to its website, and the replies (over 2,200 of them) made interesting reading.

So what do people say works for them?

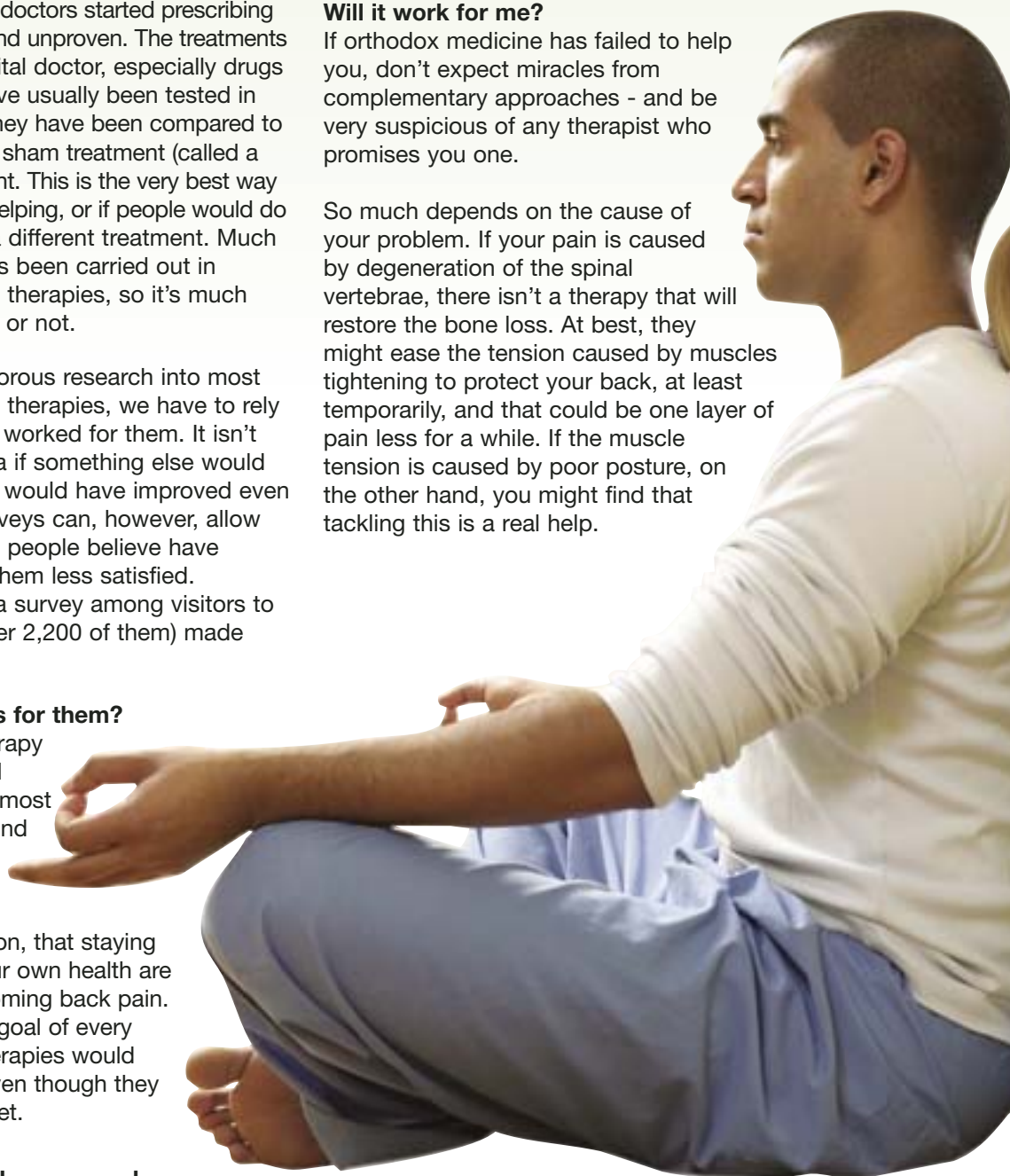
The survey showed that no therapy works for everyone. Pilates and yoga were the highest rated. Almost half those who'd tried them found that Pilates or yoga helped them feel better for at least six months. This is consistent with current orthodox medical opinion, that staying active and taking charge of your own health are the keys to successfully overcoming back pain. Long-term improvement is the goal of every back pain sufferer, so these therapies would seem to be well worth trying even though they haven't been well researched yet.

For short-term relief, therapies designed to promote relaxation seemed to be helpful. About half the people who used them gained some benefit from aromatherapy, massage, reflexology and self-help stress reduction for a short time. Acupuncture, too, gave temporary pain relief for just over 40%. Faith healing, homeopathy and Devil's Claw were most likely to be rated as not helping at all, though all of them were successful for some people.

Will it work for me?

If orthodox medicine has failed to help you, don't expect miracles from complementary approaches – and be very suspicious of any therapist who promises you one.

So much depends on the cause of your problem. If your pain is caused by degeneration of the spinal vertebrae, there isn't a therapy that will restore the bone loss. At best, they might ease the tension caused by muscles tightening to protect your back, at least temporarily, and that could be one layer of pain less for a while. If the muscle tension is caused by poor posture, on the other hand, you might find that tackling this is a real help.



So what's best for you? Unfortunately, it's an unanswerable question. A therapy that one person finds very successful may do nothing for another with a similar condition. For example, the survey found that while 19% of people who tried chiropractic found that gave them real, long-term help, 14% felt that it had made them worse. There's no way of telling in advance which category any individual will fall into.

Ask the right questions

Some simple questions could help you make a more informed choice and mean that you're less likely to be disappointed by choosing a therapy that is unlikely to work for you.

● Are you clear about what you can hope for?

Unfortunately, some complementary and alternative practitioners make unfounded and exaggerated claims for their therapies, so always bear in mind that there is no guaranteed 'cure' for back pain. Some therapies may help a sudden attack to heal more quickly, but chronic back pain that has been with you for some time is less likely to respond permanently or quickly.

● Is the practitioner properly qualified?

Chiropractors and osteopaths are trained to degree level and are not allowed to practise unless they have passed all the relevant examinations and are registered by the Government. Other therapies are not regulated in this way. Anyone can claim to be a reflexologist, an aromatherapist, a massage therapist, a healer or a hypnotherapist, for instance, and can set up as a practitioner with no training at all. Even when therapists are members of an organisation that oversees standards, it is worth looking at the amount of study needed to qualify. How confident do you feel entrusting your body to someone with six weekends' training?

● How long will it take?

A responsible practitioner will give some indication of how many sessions or consultations it may take to achieve a result. With treatments such as chiropractic, osteopathy and acupuncture, signs of improvement should be apparent within five or six

sessions. If you don't feel any better, there's not much point in continuing. Exercise or movement-based therapies may take a number of sessions to retrain the body's lifetime habits and need to be practised consistently for their benefits to continue. Some therapies such as aromatherapy, reflexology or massage give short-term relief – sometimes for just a few hours – and need to be repeated when that relief wears off. If you find that a therapy helps reduce your pain for a while it's a case of deciding whether you want, or can afford, repeated treatments.

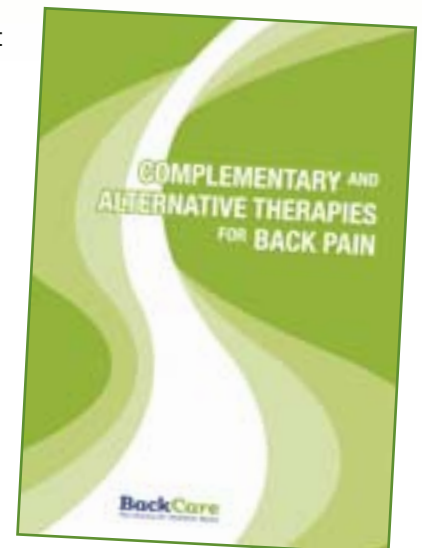
● How much effort are you prepared to put into tackling your back pain?

Exercise-based approaches such as Pilates and yoga seem to be the most effective for long-term improvement, according to the survey, and there is some evidence that Tai Chi may help improve movement (though not necessarily pain). Many people are reluctant to try anything that involves movement or exercise in case it makes their pain worse, but research has shown that being inactive makes recovery much less likely. A properly trained and qualified teacher will ensure that you exercise safely. Always look for a member of one of the major organisations with high training requirements.

There isn't much scientific evidence that complementary or alternative therapies really work, but many of the people who have tried and been helped by them would argue this doesn't matter – it worked for them. Every therapy looked at helped some of the people who tried it, though some were much more successful than others. So there's always the possibility that a therapy may work for you, especially if it has for other people.

BackCare's new booklet **Complementary and Alternative Therapies for Back Pain**

looks at the evidence for a range of popular therapies – what the scientists say and what people who've tried them have found. It has details of training, qualifications and contact details for all the major complementary and alternative therapies.



Available for £2.00 + £0.50p p&p from www.backcare.org.uk or by post with cheque, payable to BackCare, from BackCare, 16 Elmtree Rd, Teddington, Middlesex TW11 8ST. Telephone 020 8977 5474, e.mail:info@backcare.org.uk.

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