

Lower Clinical Priority Policy

Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Policy

This policy is assigned static status. This policy applies indefinitely, unless or until new evidence likely to have a material effect on the policy becomes available.

It is the responsibility of the referring and treating clinicians to ensure compliance with this policy.

All complementary and alternative therapies, including acupuncture, are considered low priority and will only be commissioned by the NHS on an exceptional basis. Funding for treatment is by prior approval. Applications should be made to the Exceptional Cases Panel using the funding request form.

Complementary and alternative therapies include (but are not restricted to): acupuncture, chiropractic treatment, herbal medicine, osteopathy, homeopathy, reflexology, Alexander technique, aromatherapy, and meditation. They are not routinely commissioned by the NHS (nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine).

Smoking

Patients who smoke should be advised to attempt to stop smoking - see [stop smoking policy](#).

Rationale and Evidence

Mainstream treatments for which there is evidence of effectiveness should be prioritised. There is a lack of robust evidence that complementary therapies improve patient outcomes. NICE recommends against the use of acupuncture for the treatment of low back pain (see reference 1), osteoarthritis (see reference 2), irritable bowel syndrome (see reference 3) and rheumatoid arthritis (see reference 4). They do recommend acupuncture for tension-type headache and migraine (see reference 5) and for chronic primary pain (see reference 6). NICE supports the use of the Alexander technique for Parkinson's disease (see reference 7), ginger or acupressure for morning sickness (see reference 8). However, there is a high risk of bias, even in sham-controlled trials, and inconsistency of findings and the overall strength of evidence was graded as low or very low quality.

Glossary

Acupuncture:	A traditional Chinese method of healing by inserting thin needles into certain areas beneath the skin and electrically stimulating or heating and rotating them.
Acupressure:	A massage technique approach designed to lessen pain, alleviate muscle tension, boost blood circulation, and encourage deep states of relaxation.
Alexander Technique:	Teaches improved posture and how to move more efficiently.
Aromatherapy:	The use of essential oils to promote wellness and health.
Chiropractic Treatment:	A system of physical manipulations of minor displacements of the spinal column. These minor displacements of the spine are believed to affect the associated or neighbouring nerves and so cause malfunctions of the muscles throughout the body.

	By manipulating the affected part of the spinal column, the patient's complaint, whatever it may be e.g. backache is relieved.
Homeopathy:	An alternative approach to medicine based upon the theory that diseases are curable by those drugs which produce effects on the body similar to symptoms caused by the disease. In administering the remedies, the theory is that their effect is increased by giving them in minute doses obtained by diluting them to an extreme degree.
Osteopathy:	A system of treatment by manipulating bones and other parts with the idea of thereby restoring functions in the bodily mechanism that have been deranged.
Reflexology:	The thumb and fingers are used to press areas of the feet or hands, thought to be connected to organs, glands, and other parts of the body.
Sham Therapy:	An inactive treatment or procedure that is intended to mimic the intervention being studied as closely as possible.

References

1. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence NICE Guideline 59 Low back pain and sciatica in over 16s: assessment and management.
2. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Clinical Guidance 177 Osteoarthritis: care and management February 2014.
3. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Clinical Guidance 61 irritable bowel syndrome in adults: diagnosis and management February 2008.
4. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence NICE Guideline 100 Rheumatoid arthritis in adults: management July 2018.
5. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Clinical Guidance 150 Headache in over 12s: Diagnosis and management September 2012.
6. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence NICE Guideline 193 Chronic pain: primary and secondary in over 16s: assessment for all chronic pain and management of chronic primary pain April 2021.
7. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence NICE. Recommendations | Parkinson's disease in adults | Guidance | NICE (Internet). Cited 2023 Nov 27. Available from: [nice.org.uk/guidance/ng71/chapter/recommendations](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng71/chapter/recommendations).
8. National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Recommendations | Antenatal care | Guidance | NICE (Internet). Cited 2023 Nov 27. Available from: [nice.org.uk/guidance/ng201/chapter/recommendations](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng201/chapter/recommendations).

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