Myeloma Australia

LIVING WELL INFOSHEET

Complementary therapies and myeloma

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Complementary therapies and myeloma

Things to remember

- Many people with myeloma are interested in exploring complementary therapies to improve their quality of life and support them during their time both on and off treatment.
- Complementary therapies include supplements and mind-body therapies that are used *alongside* prescribed treatments for myeloma.
- You may be interested in complementary therapies to help ease symptoms of myeloma (like pain and fatigue), reduce side effects of myeloma treatments (like nausea and peripheral neuropathy), and to help relieve stress, improve sleep and your overall wellbeing.
- Some complementary therapies can be helpful for these symptoms, while others may interact with your myeloma treatment, causing it to be less effective or cause more side effects.
- That's why it's so important to talk to your treating team about any complementary therapies you're interested in trying. Your treating team will provide you with evidence-based advice that's tailored to your unique situation.
- Popular complementary therapies used by people with myeloma include massage and acupuncture. With safety guidelines in mind, these can be very helpful in managing symptoms such as stress and pain, and can help improve your quality of life.
- Mindfulness and meditation practices help you to engage fully in the present moment, rather than getting caught up in thoughts about the past and future. There is good evidence that these practices can help people with cancer to cope better, reducing their pain, anxiety, depression, fatigue and nausea, while improving sleep and feelings of wellbeing.
- Medicinal cannabis and supplements like turmeric, green tea and vitamin C have less evidence to support their use and can cause side effects or interact with specific myeloma treatments. Your treating team needs to carefully consider the safety of each supplement for each person.
- Ask your treating team if there is a complementary therapies unit available at your treatment centre, or if they can recommend a qualified therapist who understands the role of complementary therapies in cancer care.

Complementary therapies and myeloma

Many people living with myeloma are interested in exploring complementary therapies as a way of improving their wellbeing.

Some complementary therapies can be helpful, while others can interact with myeloma treatment, causing the treatment to be less effective or to cause more side effects. That's why the single most important thing to know about complementary therapies is to be honest and open with your treating team about any therapy you are interested in trying.

Your treating team is here to advise and support you throughout your treatment. They want to make sure you are safe, and experience the best results from your treatment, as well as the best possible quality of life — and your openness about complementary therapies is key to this.

This infosheet tells you a little more about some of the main types of complementary therapies that people with myeloma are interested in trying, any research supporting them, as well as important safety information. This will provide you with a starting point when considering complementary therapies, but always remember that your treating team, which includes the hospital pharmacist, will be the best source of information about *your* treatment.

> ***"I've always enjoyed having massages, so after I was diagnosed with myeloma, I looked for an oncology massage therapist who knew about myeloma and extra precautions they would need to take for me. I now schedule in a monthly massage, which I always look forward to, and find it really helps me to release tension and leaves me feeling very relaxed."***
>
> **Rosa, Queensland**

> ***"I was bothered by the tingling and burning in my hands and feet caused by peripheral neuropathy. A friend who had also been treated for cancer said that they'd found acupuncture helpful. I checked with my haematologist, who agreed it was worth a try. It has definitely helped, and also seems to be reducing my overall level of pain."***
>
> **Derek, New South Wales**

If you're reading a printed version of this infosheet, we've used a magnifying glass symbol throughout to let you know where you can search for more information in the **'Learn more'** section at the end of this infosheet.

What are complementary therapies and why do people use them?

Complementary therapies *are ones that are used* alongside *prescribed treatments for myeloma.*

Many people with myeloma are interested in using complementary therapies to support them during their time both on and off treatment. Because both myeloma and its treatment cause many symptoms that affect quality of life, many people are interested in trying these therapies to help:

- enhance treatment
- ease myeloma symptoms, like pain and fatigue
- reduce side effects of myeloma treatments, like nausea and peripheral neuropathy
- relieve stress and tension
- improve sleep
- increase overall health and sense of wellbeing
- provide a greater sense of control over their treatment and life.

There are many different types of therapies and sometimes they are grouped into:

- **Supplements**, which may include vitamins, minerals, herbal and other plant-based medicines.
- **Mind-body therapies**, such as acupuncture, massage, art and music therapy, qi gong, mindfulness, and meditation.
- **Lifestyle changes**, such as exercise and diet (which we have covered separately in their own infosheets).

What about alternative therapies?

Alternative therapies *are treatments that are promoted* instead *of conventional treatments, and tend to be used by people who have opted out of having the recommended conventional treatment for myeloma.*

These alternative treatments are unproven, usually expensive, and may be harmful. Be wary of any therapy that claims to cure cancer, is very expensive, requires you to stop conventional treatment, or asks that you don't tell your treating team about it.

Examples of alternative therapies include megadoses of vitamins, shark cartilage and juice fasting.

If you would prefer to explore alternative therapies to manage your myeloma, it's important to discuss these with your doctor. This is especially important if you want to return to conventional treatments later, as it may impact the treatments that you can safely use.

Although some people use the terms 'complementary' and 'alternative' as though they mean the same thing, they are actually very different from each other, especially in their safety and effectiveness.

Where does integrative oncology or integrative medicine fit in?

You may hear other terms, *integrative oncology*, or *integrative medicine* being used. These terms are used when conventional treatments and evidence-based complementary therapies are used together. Some cancer centres adopt this approach to treatment.

Talking to your treating team

Tell your treating team about any complementary therapies you are using or interested in trying — including herbs, spices, vitamins, minerals, hands-on, and natural or home remedies. This will help your team to manage your care and keep you safe. Research shows that people with myeloma generally don't talk to their treating team about complementary therapies they are using because they feel embarrassed or that their team won't approve, but it's really important to have input from your team.

Ask if your cancer treatment centre has any complementary therapy programs available, such as yoga, massage and meditation. Alternatively, your team may be able to recommend a qualified therapist who understands the role of complementary therapies in cancer care.

If you are considering taking any supplements or herbal medicines, your team will ask the hospital pharmacist to do a cross-check between the proposed complementary medicine and each of your conventional treatments to see if there might be any interactions between the two.

Be aware

There are a number of general concerns you need to be aware of when you have myeloma and you're thinking about using complementary therapies:

- Some complementary medicines can make conventional myeloma treatments less effective or more toxic. The hospital pharmacist can check for this.
- Research studies and information about complementary therapies are often not as rigorous or controlled as for conventional therapies.
- When researching complementary therapies, you'll often find conflicting information, but you'll tend to focus on what you want to hear!
- Different brands and different formats (liquid, capsules, tablets) of supplements and herbal medicines can contain very different amounts and types of active compounds. It's therefore impossible to know what effects they will have in your body.
- Recommendations about which complementary therapies you can safely use may change when your conventional treatments change. It's important to talk to your treating team again for their new recommendations.
- Sometimes, you will be able to take a particular therapy on non-treatment days, but not on days when you are having conventional treatment. Your treating team will advise on this.
- Make sure that any practitioner:
  - is qualified to practice in their specific area of complementary therapies
  - knows that you have myeloma and the stage of your condition
  - is keen to ask your treating team for information to help keep you safe.

Popular complementary therapies

We have included brief information about some of the most popular complementary therapies that people with myeloma might be interested in exploring. It's not possible to advise which of these will be helpful or safe for you, and we have provided this information as a starting point for you to discuss with your treating team.

Massage therapy

Massage therapy can be soothing and relaxing, helping to release muscular and emotional tension.

Many research studies show that oncology massage can help to manage symptoms such as stress, pain, anxiety, depression and fatigue in people who have had chemotherapy for cancer. This can help to improve your mood and overall sense of wellbeing.

Safety information

- If you have myeloma bone disease, you must tell your massage therapist. They will need to take extra care with massage so there's not too much pressure on your bones.
- If your platelet count is low, you may bruise more easily. Ask your treating team if your platelet level is high enough for massage to be safe.
- It's ideal if you can find an accredited oncology massage therapist who will know how to tailor massages to your needs.
  - Visit the Australian Massage Directory and choose 'Oncology Massage' from the 'Type of Treatment' dropdown list. Enter your suburb or postcode to search for an accredited oncology massage therapist in your area.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a type of traditional Chinese medicine where a trained professional inserts very thin needles into specific points in your body that relate to the types of symptoms you are experiencing.

Several research studies in people with myeloma have shown that acupuncture can help reduce nausea, peripheral neuropathy, pain and the need for pain relief — while improving appetite, activity levels, sleep quality, and overall quality of life.

Safety information

- Because myeloma and its treatments can cause a decrease in white blood cells and antibodies that help your body to fight infections, your practitioner will need to take extreme care with you when providing acupuncture. Always check with your treating team to find out if acupuncture is suitable for you.
- You will need to take extra care if having acupuncture while you have an active infection. Avoid having acupuncture needles inserted in any areas where you have skin infections.
- Acupuncture appears to be safe for people with thrombocytopenia (low platelet counts).

Mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness and meditation are practices that focus your awareness on being fully engaged in the present moment, paying attention to your sensations, thoughts, and feelings — and accepting them without judgement. This is very different from the way many people go about everyday life, where we tend to be distracted by thoughts about the past or future.

Studies show that mindfulness and meditation can improve the quality of life for people with cancer, helping them to cope better, and to reduce pain, anxiety, depression, fatigue and nausea, while improving sleep and wellbeing.

You can practice informal mindfulness by consciously bringing your attention to everyday situations or activities. For example, when you're walking, notice how your body feels. Notice how your feet feel against the ground, how your arms feel as they swing by your side, and how the sun and air feel against your skin. Notice all of these sensations in the here and now, and focus on how they feel without questioning or judging them.

More formal mindfulness practices are taught in the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) 8-week course, which has been thoroughly researched for its role in helping to reduce stress and improve quality of life.

- MBSR courses may be offered at larger treatment centres, cancer centres and community centres, as well as through private practitioners. Search online for 'MBSR' and your suburb, town or city to find programs near you.

> ***"I use the 'Calm' app on my phone and choose a meditation or sleep story that feels right for me at the time to help ease my racing mind and drift off to sleep."***
>
> **Patricia, Victoria**

Meditation is a practice where you put time aside to deliberately focus on one thing — perhaps your breath or sensations in your body — for 10 or more minutes at a time. There are many different types of meditation and you may like to experiment to find a style that you feel comfortable with.

- Some hospitals and cancer support groups offer meditation classes. You'll also find classes in the community, online and on smartphone apps.
- *Finding calm during cancer* is a Cancer Council podcast that includes guided meditation and relaxation exercises.

> ***"A couple of people in our myeloma support group recommended the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course. I had been feeling very anxious, so I did some more research for myself and found a program at a nearby community centre. I'm now 4 weeks into the course and can already see a shift in my mindset: I'm able to be more accepting of my situation and I'm not ruminating as much, which is helping my mental wellbeing and my relationships."***
>
> **Kai, South Australia**

Medicinal cannabis

Some people who are living with myeloma are interested in medicinal cannabis (also called medicinal marijuana), to help manage certain symptoms and treatment side effects.

At the moment, there is some limited evidence from clinical trials in humans that medicinal cannabis may help to:

- relieve treatment-related nausea and vomiting
- relieve cancer-related pain
- stimulate appetite.

Medicinal cannabis needs stronger evidence for its use in cancer care, and several clinical trials are happening in Australia at the moment. For this reason, medicinal cannabis is usually only considered by your treating team once other conventional medicines for nausea, vomiting and pain have been tried but haven't worked well.

There are currently no medicinal cannabis products listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods for cancer care in Australia. Instead, registered medical practitioners can apply to the government to allow them to prescribe medicinal cannabis to seriously unwell people for medical reasons.

The Therapeutic Goods Association (TGA) has a web page that explains how the TGA provides safe and legal access to medicinal cannabis if a doctor thinks it is appropriate for you.

Safety information

- Medicinal cannabis can interact with other medicines, should not be taken by people with certain health conditions, and can cause side effects, including affecting your ability to drive.
- If you are interested in using medicinal cannabis as part of your myeloma care, your doctor will discuss each of these safety issues with you.

Turmeric

Turmeric is a spice that's used in cooking, and has also been used as a traditional medicine for many health problems. Today, it is a popular supplement available as tablets, capsules or gummies — either by itself or combined with other herbal medicines.

The main active substance in turmeric is *curcumin*, which is a powerful antioxidant that helps to protect cells from damage. Curcumin can also help to reduce swelling and pain.

Curcumin has been shown to have many anti-cancer effects when studied in test tubes in the laboratory. However, there is very little evidence about how these effects may translate to use in humans. There have been some small studies investigating the use of curcumin in people with MGUS, smouldering myeloma and myeloma. These studies have highlighted the need for well-designed and larger clinical trials to provide more information.

Safety information

- Curcumin can interact with many other medicines, where it may lessen their effects or increase the risk of side effects.
- In particular, curcumin can lessen the effects of the chemotherapy medicine, cyclophosphamide, which is used in myeloma treatment. Your hospital pharmacist can cross-check turmeric with any other medicines you have been prescribed for myeloma or for other health conditions.
- Curcumin can also interact with anticoagulants (blood thinners), which are often used as a supportive treatment in myeloma. Curcumin taken with some anticoagulants may increase the risk of bleeding.
- It's generally safe to use turmeric in small amounts in cooking and as a tea.
- Talk to your treating team first if you are interested in using larger amounts of turmeric or taking it as a supplement.

Green tea and vitamin C

Some people with myeloma are interested in using green tea and vitamin C, believing they may be helpful in myeloma because of their antioxidant properties.

However, there is no clear scientific evidence of their benefits or safety in myeloma.

Safety information

- We do know that both green tea and high doses of vitamin C decrease the effect of bortezomib (Velcade®). It is therefore very important to avoid green tea and high-dose vitamin C when you are having treatment with bortezomib (Velcade®).
- Avoid taking high doses of vitamin C (usually more than 500mg a day) because it can increase the acidity of your urine, which can damage your kidneys.

Many people diagnosed with cancer, including myeloma, have vitamin D deficiency. Vitamin D is an important nutrient that is essential for bone strength and maintaining a healthy immune system. Ask your doctor to check your vitamin D level and if they recommend a supplement for you.

The hospital pharmacist recommended magnesium for cramps I was experiencing as a side effect from thalidomide. They cross-checked magnesium with my myeloma treatments to make sure there wouldn't be any interactions. The magnesium has been really helpful in reducing night-time cramps in my calves. I think it's helping me to sleep better too.

Luisa, Western Australia

Supplements for peripheral neuropathy

A range of different supplements are sometimes recommended to help manage the symptoms of peripheral neuropathy. While there is mixed evidence to support their use, some people do find them helpful.

Supplements that may be recommended include:

- B vitamins: vitamin B1, B6, B12, and folic acid
- vitamin E
- amino acids: acetyl l-carnitine, alpha-lipoic acid, glutamine
- oils: fish oil, flax seed oil, evening primrose oil
- minerals: magnesium, potassium (which may also be helpful for cramps).

Safety information

- Like all supplements, these have the potential to interact with other medicines or cause side effects. Always talk to your treating team before trying any supplements for peripheral neuropathy.

Having a vitamin B12 deficiency can increase your risk of developing peripheral neuropathy. Ask your treating team to check your B12 level before you start any treatment that may cause peripheral neuropathy.

- Myeloma Australia's booklet Managing Peripheral Neuropathy provides more information to help you understand and manage peripheral neuropathy, including many practical lifestyle tips that can make a difference to your discomfort, pain and quality of life.

‘Immune-boosting’ supplements

You may hear about supplements, such as echinacea or olive leaf extract, that are intended to ‘boost’ the immune system.

Safety information

- Myeloma involves complex changes to your immune system, and we don’t know how supplements that are intended to ‘boost’ immune function may affect myeloma, and it is therefore best to avoid any of these supplements.

Other complementary therapies

There are many other complementary therapies in addition to the ones that we have highlighted in this infosheet. You may hear about aromatherapy, qi gong and tai chi, reflexology, reiki, Chinese herbal medicine and others.

The same rules apply to all these therapies: chat to your treating team first so they can assess whether the therapy can be safely used alongside your current treatment.

Learn more

You'll find more information about living as well as possible with myeloma in these resources available from myeloma.org.au:

RESOURCE	NAME	LINK
INFOSHEETS	→ 🔍 '*Exercise and myeloma* living well infosheet' → 🔍 '*Nutrition and myeloma* living well infosheet' → 🔍 '*Fatigue and myeloma* living well infosheet' → 🔍 '*Managing myeloma pain* living well infosheet' → 🔍 '*Managing myeloma bone disease* living well infosheet' → 🔍 '*Managing Peripheral Neuropathy* living well infosheet'	Go to: myeloma.org.au Search for the document using the name following the 🔍 icons
PODCASTS	→ *Mye Conversations podcast*, Season 1, Episodes 5: 'Complementary, Alternative and Integrative Medicine: A case study'.	Go to: myeloma.org.au/resources/ Click on **Podcasts** to go to https://myeloma.org.au/resources/podcasts/ Click on Season 1 tab to find the relevant episode.

More information and support

- **Look up any complementary medicine you are interested in on Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's** About Herbs database (which includes vitamins, minerals and other supplements as well as herbs). There is also an About Herbs app.
  - Go to mskcc.org and search for 'Search About Herbs'.
- **Search for a physio by location, specialty, or name.** Visit the Australian Physiotherapy Association search website: www.choose.physio.
- **Download Cancer Council Australia's booklet**, *Understanding Complementary Therapies*.
  - Go to cancervic.org.au and search for 'Understanding Complementary Therapies'.
- **Listen to meditation and relaxation exercises** on Cancer Council's *Finding calm during cancer* podcast.
  - Go to cancercouncil.com.au and search for 'Finding calm during cancer'.
- **To search for an accredited oncology massage therapist**, go to massagemyotherapy.com.au/Consumers/Australian-Massage-Directory and choose 'Oncology Massage' from the 'Type of Treatment' dropdown list. Enter your suburb or postcode to search for an accredited oncology massage therapist in your area.
- **Learn how the Therapeutic Goods Association provides safe and legal access to** medicinal cannabis if a doctor thinks it is appropriate for you.
  - Go to tga.gov.au and search for 'Medicinal cannabis information for patients'.
- **Our Specialist Myeloma Nurses** are available on our Telephone Support Line to talk with you about any aspect of myeloma, its treatment and management.

  To book a 30- or 60-minute call with a Specialist Myeloma Nurse:

  call **1800 MYELOMA** (1800 693 566)
  Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm AEST/AEDT, or

  go to myeloma.org.au and click on the 'Book a call with a Specialist Myeloma Nurse' button.

  email nurses@myeloma.org.au to contact a Specialist Myeloma Nurse at any time.

We hope you've learnt more about complementary therapies and you're ready to chat to your treating team about any that you are interested in trying.

The information in this sheet is not intended to replace medical care or the advice of your treating team. Please talk to your treating team about the any complementary therapies you are interested in trying and follow the personalised advice they offer you.