Many women with ovarian cancer are interested in trying complementary therapies — natural therapies that are used together with mainstream medicine to help manage symptoms and side effects, reduce pain, relieve stress and encourage a feeling of wellbeing.

This information sheet will tell you more about some of the different types of complementary therapies and how they may help you. This sheet also explains why it is important to talk to your doctor about all types of therapy that you are thinking about using.

**What are complementary therapies and how can they help me?**

Complementary therapies are not used instead of mainstream medical care, but work side-by-side with mainstream medical treatments to help:

- Relieve stress, anxiety and sleeplessness
- Relieve nausea
- Reduce pain
- Manage symptoms
- Support your immune system
- Relieve side effects of chemotherapy
- Encourage an overall feeling of wellbeing

Research shows that women with ovarian cancer can benefit in many ways from using complementary therapies. These therapies aren’t intended to cure cancer, but to help you feel as well as you can.

**What about alternative therapies?**

Alternative therapies are something quite different and are promoted as an alternative to conventional treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. Alternative treatments are unproven, 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 not tell your doctor about the treatment. Examples of alternative therapies include mega doses of vitamins, shark cartilage and juice fasting.

**Before you start ...**

Before beginning any type of complementary therapy, have a chat to your GP or specialist and tell them about what you want to try. This is no time to be shy or embarrassed: it’s not your doctor’s job to judge your choices, but it IS their job to make sure that the therapy can work happily with conventional treatments. Some natural therapies can interact with chemotherapy, preventing it from working properly or causing side effects. Think of your GP or specialist as the coordinator of your treatment who needs to know everything — so keep them in the loop at all times.

**Which different therapies might help?**

There are many different therapies that may help in different ways and at various stages of your illness and treatment.

Some of the therapies that you may want to think about trying include:

“Acupuncture has been proven effective in relieving nausea and vomiting resulting from chemotherapy … it can also alleviate anxiety, panic disorders and insomnia.”

*World Health Organization*
Massage
The skin is your body’s largest organ and is covered in sensors. Massage stimulates those sensors to produce endorphins and encephalins — your body’s natural feel-good and pain-relieving chemicals. Benefits may include relief of muscle tension, improved sleep, reduced fatigue, pain relief, deep relaxation and immune support.

Acupuncture
Acupuncture is an ancient form of traditional Chinese medicine that uses ultra-thin disposable needles to stimulate the nervous system. Acupuncture has been well researched and we know that it can make a big difference to help relieve nausea, vomiting and other side effects of chemo and radiotherapy. It can also help with the sleeplessness that is often part of living with ovarian cancer.

Meditation
Meditation is a way of slowing down and observing your mind. It doesn’t have to be mystical or involve special techniques, and can be as simple as sitting in a quiet place and focusing on your breathing. By slowing down your body and mind, meditation helps you to relax and allows your body to focus its energy on getting well. Many people notice they have a greater feeling of wellbeing and relaxation and begin to sleep better when they practise meditation regularly. Have a look in your local library or bookstore for books or CDs that provide a simple introduction to meditation.

Positive imagery
Positive imagery uses the power of your mind to remember and imagine all kinds of positive experiences. It may be as simple as remembering a time when you felt happy, energised and well and then bringing those feelings back into your body. Use any opportunity to bring positive thoughts and experiences into your life. It’s just another way to get your body producing those feel-good and pain-killing chemicals — and we can all do with plenty more of those!

Herbal medicines
Some naturopaths may recommend herbal medicines to help with symptoms and chemo side effects. When prescribed carefully by a naturopath who specialises in this area, these medicines can be helpful, but it’s vitally important that you talk to your GP or oncologist before starting to take any herbs or vitamins. Herbs and vitamins are powerful medicines and some can interact with conventional cancer treatments.

Homeopathy
Homeopathy is a system of medicine that uses tiny doses of substances that support your body during illness. A natural therapist that specialises in homeopathy may prescribe remedies to help with nausea, sleeplessness, anxiety and energy levels.

Art and music therapy
Even if you think you haven’t got a creative bone in your body, you could be pleasantly surprised if you give art or music therapy a go. These are fantastic ways to ‘lose yourself’ in activity that is totally removed from your illness — helping you to relax and distract you from pain.

Other complementary therapies that you may want to find out more

“I went along to an art group (never having painted before) — I found it a great way to relax — trying to mix a paint colour just right banishes all thoughts from your mind!”
Wanda Lawson
Ovarian cancer survivor
about include aromatherapy, tai chi, reflexology and yoga.

**How can I find a complementary therapist?**

**GPs, specialists or oncology nurses** often know about the therapists who work together with mainstream medicine to give you the best possible outcome. Don’t be afraid to ask.

**Cancer treatment centres at hospitals** now offer complementary therapies, including meditation, relaxation and stress management.

**Talking to other women at a support group** is often a good way to find out about respected complementary health care professionals in your local area.

**The Australian Traditional Natural Medicine Society (ATMS)** is the main professional organisation for natural therapists in Australia. Choose ‘Find a practitioner’ on their web site at [www.atms.com.au](http://www.atms.com.au) to search for local practitioners by therapy type.

**Sources used for this information sheet**

These sources are also a good place to start if you want to read more about complementary therapies.

**Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center**
[www.mskcc.org](http://www.mskcc.org)

Choose ‘Cancer information’, and then choose ‘Integrative medicine’

**National Cancer Institute (US)**
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

From ‘Cancer topics’ choose ‘Complementary and alternative medicine’ under the heading ‘Treatment’

**Cancer Council SA**

From 'Info & support' on the front page, choose, ‘Coping with cancer’ and then ‘Complementary therapies’