Natural Multiple Sclerosis Treatments To Try

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) for Multiple Sclerosis

Many of us with MS become disillusioned with traditional medicine and therapies, especially if and when we are diagnosed with secondary progressive MS (SPMS) that can't be treated with disease modifying treatments (DMTs) such as beta interferon.

When I was diagnosed with SPMS a few years ago I couldn't see the point in carrying on injecting myself once a week with a drug that made me feel worse for five days out of seven when most neurologists agree that DMTs are not affective for SPMS. I stopped treatment immediately but it made me feel vulnerable, like I was giving in to the progression of my condition.

This is when I started fighting back and researching complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to see if there was anything else I could do. I wanted to regain some control over my situation and feel like I was doing something proactive.

Once I started looking into it, I realized how much there was out there that claimed to help symptoms — and in some cases reversed MS altogether! Below are some of the more well-known CAMs.

Acupuncture

In acupuncture, invisible lines of energy that run under the surface of the body are stimulated using fine needles. According to Chinese philosophy, the body's healing response to illnesses can become unbalanced if motivating energy, called qi (pronounced 'chee'), is disrupted, so stimulating this using fine needles can help.

Acupuncture seems to offer short-term benefits for some people. There is little research into the benefits of acupuncture for MS but what there is suggests some improvement in symptoms such as pain, anxiety and fatigue.

Cannabis

Many MSers around the world swear by cannabis as a treatment for spasticity, pain and bladder problems, but it remains a controversial treatment given that in many places it is still illegal even for medicinal use.

The CAMS study, involving 660 participants around the UK, had mixed results for the effects of cannabis on spasticity and other symptoms. Other research suggests some improvements in mobility and neuroprotection, protecting the brain from damage caused by MS.

Sativex is a licenced, cannabis0based mouth spray that can provide relief for people who don't respond well to standard anti-spasticity medication.

Next page: two more natural multiple sclerosis treatments to try, plus finding what's right for you.

Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT)

Also called oxygen therapy, this involves breathing oxygen through a mask in a pressurized chamber similar to a diving bell.

Anecdotal evidence suggests HBOT can be helpful for fatigue and bladder problems, but research into HBOT has found no evidence that it is effective.

HBOT can be found at many MS treatment centres and usually involves an initial, intensive course of 20 sessions over a month with follow up treatments at less frequent intervals.

I have HBOT treatment at my local treatment centre and I find it gives me a boost — but often the effort of getting there on a Saturday morning outweighs the benefits, and I think a good rest at home after a week at work makes me feel just as good!

Reflexology

This involves stimulating points on the soles of the feet to induce therapeutic effects on different parts of the body.

A number of studies found improvements in bladder problems, muscle strength and spasticity but it was unclear if the improvements were as a result of reflexology or massage.

Another study used a survey method to investigate CAMs in general and the results highlighted reflexology as one of the most popular therapies used by people with MS.

Finding What's Right For You

There are many more CAMs to choose from but the trouble with CAMs is that, compared with conventional medicine, there isn’t a lot of published research evidence into which might be of benefit. We all need to shop around and see what is most helpful for our specific symptoms. The cost of this can add up, but your local MS treatment centre may offer subsidized treatments.

Another thing to think about is safety. Just because a treatment is “natural” doesn’t mean it doesn’t have side effects and can’t interfere with mainstream treatments. It’s important to let your neurologist or other healthcare professional know what other treatments you’re having.

For me, the best CAM to investigate is diet. It’s the most important thing when trying to give yourself the best chance of maintaining good health. There are loads of diets tailored to MS, so investigate what you can realistically follow and make some changes. I cut out gluten and dairy a few years ago and the benefits for fatigue, weight loss and general health have been amazing.

None of these CAMs will cure MS but some will make you feel better, especially short-term, and they will all make you feel like you’re doing something proactive to manage your symptoms.