

Table 1: Examples of complementary medicine used for pain control*

Name	Principle	Conditions used for	Efficacy	Safety	Risk-benefit balance
Acupuncture	Needle insertion into acupuncture points for health purposes	Used as a panacea in China, in the West predominantly for pain control	Encouraging data	Serious adverse effects are rare, mild ones occur in ~7% of cases	Positive for some conditions
Alexander technique	Training process of ideal body posture and movement; developed by F M Alexander	Musculoskeletal problems, e.g. back pain	Few clinical trials exist, no final verdict possible	No serious adverse effects	Uncertain
Aromatherapy	Application of essential oils usually through gentle massage techniques; developed by R M Gatttefossé	Relaxation, chronic pain	Systematic review was inconclusive	Allergic reactions to oils	Uncertain
Autogenic training	Form of self-hypnosis for relaxation and stress reduction; developed by J Schultz	Stress management, chronic pain	Encouraging evidence	No serious adverse effects	Positive for stress, uncertain for pain
Chelation therapy	Intravenous infusion of EDTA used for 'debloking' arteries from arteriosclerotic lesions	Circulatory disorders, e.g. intermittent claudication (ischaemic pain)	Repeatedly shown in rigorous clinical trials to be ineffective	Serious adverse effects reported	Negative

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Chiropractic	Popular manual therapy based on the assumption that most health problems are due to malalignments of the spine and treatable through spinal manipulation; developed by D D Palmer	Back pain, neck pain	Conclusions of systematic reviews of chiropractic for back pain are not uniform. The methodologically best are not positive	Serious adverse effects have been reported, their exact incidence is not known	Negative
Herbal medicine	Medical use of preparations containing exclusively plant material	Various, including pain	Some herbs have been shown to be effective, e.g. Devil's Claw	Depends on specific herb (e.g. toxicity, herb-drug interaction)	Positive for some herbs
Homoeopathy	Medical use of diluted remedies according to the 'like cures like' principle	Various benign, chronic conditions associated with pain, e.g. headache	No sound evidence	No serious adverse effects	Negative
Hypnotherapy	Induction of trance-like state to influence the unconscious mind	Chronic pain	Encouraging evidence	Adverse effects probably infrequent	Positive

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Massage	Various techniques of manual stimulation of cutaneous, subcutaneous, or muscular structures	Musculoskeletal pain, e.g. back pain	Encouraging evidence	Few serious adverse effects	Positive
Osteopathy	Various techniques of spinal mobilization; developed by T Still	Back pain, neck pain	Systematic reviews of osteopathy for back pain are inconclusive	Adverse effects less than with chiropractic	Inconclusive
Reflexology	Internal organs correspond to areas on the soles of the feet and can be influenced through massaging these	Relaxation, chronic pain	Inconclusive	No serious adverse effects	Inconclusive
Spiritual healing	Umbrella term for techniques of channelling of 'healing energy' through a healer into a patient	Chronic pain	Clinical studies highly contradictory; the best recent studies are negative	No serious adverse effects	Negative
Yoga	Meditative, postural, and breathing techniques from ancient India	Various conditions associated with pain, e.g. back pain	Inconclusive	No serious adverse effects	Inconclusive

* data based on systematic reviews published in Ernst E, Stevinson C, Pittler M H, White A R (2001) The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. Edinburgh: Mosby.