

Understanding

Cancer and complementary therapies

Caring for people with cancer

Understanding

Cancer and complementary therapies

This booklet has been written to help you to understand more about cancer and complementary therapies.

This booklet has information about complementary therapies, so that you can understand their potential benefits and risks – during or after your cancer treatment.

You can make a note below of the contact names and information that you may need.

Useful numbers

Specialist nurse/liaison nurse

Family doctor (GP)

Surgeon

Medical oncologist

Radiation oncologist

Medical social worker

Registered dietitian

Psychologist

Physiotherapist

Pharmacist

Local cancer support centre

Daffodil Centre

Irish Cancer Society Support Line

Freephone 1800 200 700



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Fast facts

What are complementary therapies? Page 12

Complementary therapies are treatments and activities that you can have along with your standard medical treatment to try to cope with side-effects and feel better in yourself. For example, mindfulness, yoga and acupuncture.

Will complementary therapies help me? Page 12

Your medical team will give you the best possible care after your cancer diagnosis, but you can also help to care for yourself. Complementary therapies can't treat or cure cancer, but some may help you to feel better in yourself, physically and mentally. They may help you to feel more relaxed and better able to cope with your cancer and the side-effects of treatment. You may also enjoy them!

Are complementary therapies safe? Page 24

Many complementary therapies are safe for cancer patients, but some may not be recommended. Some may be safe for other people but not for you. For example, they might make your treatment less effective. You should be careful and always get advice from a healthcare professional who is familiar with your diagnosis and treatment.

What's the difference between complementary and alternative therapies? Page 9

Complementary therapies are used **together with** standard medical treatment. Alternative therapies are used **instead of** standard medical care. For example, using a special diet instead of chemotherapy.

Alternative therapies are **never** recommended for people living with and beyond cancer. There's no scientific proof that they work and they may not be safe. Standard medical treatments are now very effective at controlling and often curing cancer. Choosing alternative therapies instead of standard, evidence-based treatments – or delaying standard treatment – can mean treatment is less effective and may worsen your chance of recovering.

Where can I find out more? Page 59

It's very important to talk to your doctor or cancer care team if you're thinking of using complementary or alternative therapies.

You can also talk to one of our Cancer Nurses by calling our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or by visiting a Daffodil Centre. There are some helpful websites on page 59.



Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

We're here for you

If you or your family have any questions or worries, want to know where to get support, or if you just need to talk, you can talk to one of our Cancer Nurses.

Ways to get in touch

- Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700
- Drop in to a Daffodil Centre.
Email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie to find your local Daffodil Centre.
- Email us: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Introduction

Complementary and alternative therapies are products and activities that are not part of standard (conventional) medical care. These can range from relaxation techniques and physical therapies to herbal products, vitamins and special diets. This booklet has been written to help you to understand more about:

- The difference between complementary and alternative therapies
- Types of therapies you might hear about
- Their benefits to cancer patients, and any risks

The Irish Cancer Society believes that some complementary therapies – used together with conventional, evidence-based treatment – can help some people cope with the symptoms of disease and its treatment, aid relaxation, and reduce tension and anxiety. Your cancer doctor can advise you on what might be safe and helpful for you.

Many cancer support centres across the country provide a range of complementary therapies for cancer patients.

The Society does not recommend the use of alternative therapies. These are used **instead of** standard medical care. If you are planning to start an alternative medicine or treatment, it is vital that you discuss this with your doctor.

The Society welcomes more scientific research into complementary and alternative therapies. This will help patients to make informed decisions about their care. Research also supports health professionals to give the best advice about therapies that are helpful and safe.

The Society asks those who have any questions about any type of cancer treatment or therapy to discuss them with their doctor.

You can also call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre in one of 13 hospitals nationwide.





Standard, complementary and alternative – what's the difference?

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Standard (conventional) treatments

These are the treatments normally used in hospitals. For example, surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormone therapy, immunotherapy and targeted therapies.

Why do people use standard treatments?

- Standard medical treatments have been thoroughly researched and tested to prove that they work and are safe to use for humans.
- Standard treatments cure many cancers and help people to live longer and to manage side-effects better.
- Doctors understand how these treatments work and know which dose works best.
- Doctors understand the different possible side-effects of each treatment and how likely they are to happen.



More people than ever are surviving cancer, thanks to cancer research finding new and improved treatments. Standard treatments don't cure everyone's cancer, but they are effective for very many people.

Complementary therapies

These are therapies that can be used together with standard medical treatment to help people feel better emotionally and to manage some side-effects and symptoms. For example, meditation, aromatherapy and acupuncture. Many complementary therapies are safe for cancer patients, but some may not be recommended. Ask your doctor about this.

Why do people use complementary therapies?

Different complementary therapies can help some people to feel better mentally and physically, both during treatment and afterwards. They may:

- Help you to feel more relaxed
- Reduce anxiety, stress, tension and depression
- Reduce symptoms like pain, nausea, breathlessness or fatigue
- Help you to feel more in control of your illness and more hopeful or positive
- Give you a sense of comfort and wellbeing, as they often focus on caring for the whole person, not just the disease or symptom

General wellbeing

Trying a complementary therapy can be a way to care for yourself and feel more in control. Taking time for yourself, joining in a group activity or feeling pampered can all be beneficial.

Complementary therapies are not meant to replace standard treatments or cure cancer. They are things you can do to care for yourself, alongside standard treatment and care.

Here are some therapies that some people have found helpful, alongside their standard treatment:

Coping with fatigue

Exercise, CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), mindfulness/meditation, Tai Chi, Qigong, massage, relaxation techniques, yoga, acupressure, acupuncture, music therapy, Reiki

Coping with anxiety

Mindfulness/meditation, yoga, relaxation techniques, music therapy, reflexology, aromatherapy, hypnosis, acupuncture, Tai Chi, Qigong, massage, Reiki

Coping with depression

Mindfulness/meditation, Tai Chi, yoga, music therapy, reflexology, relaxation techniques, Qigong, aromatherapy, hypnosis, massage

Coping with nausea and vomiting

Acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage, hypnosis, relaxation techniques, meditation

Coping with pain

Acupuncture, aromatherapy, hypnosis, massage, reflexology, yoga, music therapy, relaxation techniques such as visualisation, Tai Chi, Qigong

Coping with sleep problems

Exercise, massage, mindfulness, acupuncture, aromatherapy, meditation

Coping with stress

Aromatherapy, exercise, hypnosis, massage, mindfulness/meditation, Tai Chi, yoga, Qigong, reflexology

Integrative cancer care

Integrative care means combining (integrating) your standard cancer treatment with complementary therapies to try to feel as well as possible and to cope better with your cancer. Integrative care focuses on the whole person, rather than the part of the body affected by cancer.



Thinking about your whole health

Alongside your cancer treatment and follow-up care, it's good to think about your whole health. For example:

- **Physical health** – Do you have side-effects that are troubling you?
- **Emotional health** – How are you feeling? Do you feel anxious, depressed, hopeless, worried?
- **Practical matters** – How are you coping with day-to-day tasks? Are you able to work or study?
- **Relationships** – How are your friends and family coping? How are your relationships with important people?
- **Spirituality** – Are you questioning the meaning of life? Do you feel at odds with your culture, beliefs or values?

Support for your whole health

Thinking about all areas of your life can help you to identify where you might need information, help or support to feel as well as possible. There are lots of supports to help cancer patients and their families, both inside and outside of the hospital.

Hospital-based supports

As well as professionals who plan and deliver cancer treatment, your hospital team can include many other healthcare professionals, such as registered dietitians, physiotherapists, medical social workers, occupational therapists, palliative care teams, psycho-oncology teams and hospital chaplains. All these people can support you to feel as well as possible. For example:

- A **registered dietitian** can advise you on eating difficulties, diet and supplements.
- A **clinical psychologist** or other members of a hospital psycho-oncology team can support you in dealing with fatigue, anxiety, depression or stress.
- **Physiotherapists** can help recommend safe physical activity that may help with symptoms and side-effects.
- **Medical social workers** can help you with a range of financial, work-related, emotional and practical challenges.

Thinking about your whole health – what's best for me?

There are many parts of your life that can affect how well you feel after a cancer diagnosis and many things and people that can help you, both in the hospital and outside.

Complementary therapies

If your medical team says it's safe for you, trying a complementary therapy alongside your standard treatment may help you to feel better, both physically and emotionally. Complementary therapies may help you to cope with side-effects, manage anxiety and other difficult emotions and feel supported and cared for. It's important to find a reputable complementary therapy practitioner. Ask your medical team for advice or visit a cancer support centre. You can also see page 21 for information on finding out about complementary therapies.

Cancer support centres and support groups

Many support centres offer free groups and classes, including complementary therapies. Meeting people going through something similar and getting support from them can help you to feel better too. See page 28 for more about cancer support centres.

The Irish Cancer Society

We offer a range of supports – from practical to emotional. Our Cancer Nurses can:

- Help you to think about what might be helpful to you in all areas of your life
- Give you information, advice and emotional support
- Help you to find the supports and services that you need
- Refer you to our services such as dietitian advice, our Welfare and Supports Service, free supervised exercise classes and counselling

Identifying what you need can help you to get the right support. Talk to your medical team about your needs. You can also contact our Cancer Nurses if you want to talk about how you're feeling or if you need information, advice or help. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Alternative therapies

These are therapies that are used instead of standard treatment. Choosing alternative therapies instead of standard, evidence-based treatments – or delaying standard treatment – can mean standard treatment is less effective. This may worsen your chance of recovering. Examples of alternative therapies include 'anti-cancer' diets and herbal preparations. Some alternative therapies claim to treat or cure cancer, but there is no scientific evidence that they have any benefit, even though some people may say they are helpful, and some may harm your health.



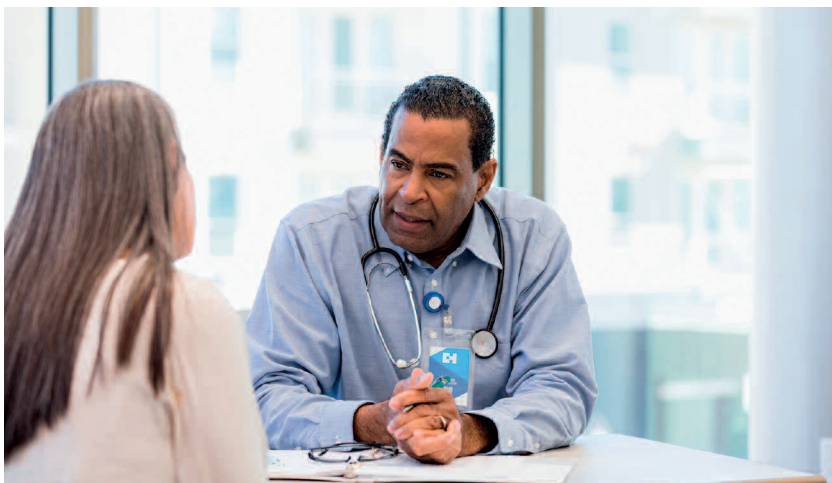
Why do people use alternative therapies?

- Some people feel that hospital-based medicine doesn't focus on their spiritual and emotional wellbeing and that an alternative approach is more personal and less clinical.
- Some people believe that chemotherapy drugs and other standard treatments are 'toxic' or damaging to the body and prefer to use what they think are 'natural' therapies.
- Not all information about alternative therapies is reliable, so people may be confused or mistaken about the benefits an alternative therapy might claim to have.

- Some alternative therapies incorrectly claim that they work better than standard treatments and so can offer false hope to people. This can be especially attractive to someone with advanced cancer, if standard treatment isn't controlling their cancer anymore.
- A cancer diagnosis can turn a person's world upside down. Making a choice about treatment can give a sense of control at this difficult time. The key is to make the right informed choice.
- Some alternative treatments are part of a person's culture. For example, Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Be careful about putting your faith in a therapy without robust scientific proof that it works. It may:

- Have no effect at all, which may be very disappointing or upsetting
- Damage your health
- Cost you a lot of money
- Negatively affect your family life
- Leave you without support and follow-up care, especially if you are travelling for alternative treatment



Delaying standard treatment for cancer can make it much harder to treat or cure.

Will it help? Is it safe?

You have the right to decide on your own treatment and care, but it's very important to make sure your decision is based on scientific research evidence and facts. The 2 main questions to ask are:

- Will it help?
- Is it safe?

Your doctors can give you advice about this – it's their job to do the very best for you.

See page 25 for advice on talking to your healthcare team.

Our nurses are also here to support you if you have any questions about standard cancer treatments or complementary or alternative therapies. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Remember that standard treatments have been through all kinds of trials and tests to check they are safe and effective before they can be used. This is not true for alternative therapies.

Some practitioners may claim to have evidence about the effectiveness of a therapy without scientific proof. For example, they may talk about a person who says a therapy worked for them. This can feel convincing, but it is not scientific proof.

It's important to make sure a source of evidence comes from a reputable place. Your doctor can give you advice about this or see page 55 for tips on making sense of health claims.



Choosing complementary therapies

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Getting advice

Talk to your healthcare team

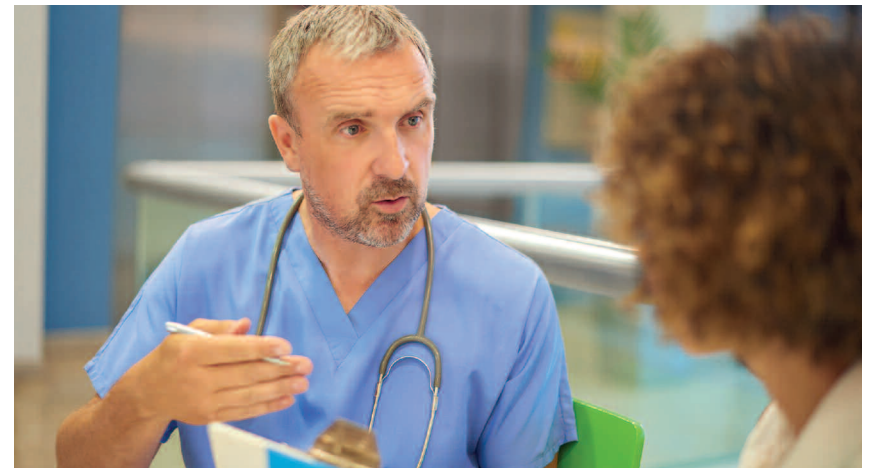
Your cancer team know about your treatment, your health and any medications you're taking, so always check with them before trying any complementary therapy.

Personalised advice: deciding what's right for you

It's important to get information that is specific to you, from someone who knows your medical history.

What is safe and helpful for one person may not be for you. The person advising you should be a qualified and registered healthcare professional, such as a dietitian, cancer doctor, specialist nurse or pharmacist. They should understand:

- Your cancer
- Any other medical conditions you have
- What type of treatment you are having or have had
- Any side-effects you have



Always check with your own healthcare team if you get any healthcare advice or recommendations from outside sources, such as the internet, social media or friends.

What is safe for me?

Many complementary therapies are safe, but some can interact with cancer treatments or may not be suitable if you have any other health conditions, even if you used them without problems before your diagnosis.

Your medical team can look at your treatment plan and your overall health to advise about benefits and risks of different therapies.

For example:

- Exercise is one of the most effective ways to improve fatigue, but the best type of exercise will depend on your general health, fitness and any side-effects or symptoms you have. For example, if you have cancer in your bones, some types of exercise may not be recommended or may need to be modified.
- Many people with cancer enjoy massage, but people with cancer are advised to avoid vigorous, deep tissue massage.
- Acupuncture may be helpful for pain and some other side-effects, but it may not be safe if you have a low white blood cell or platelet count or if you have or are at risk of lymphoedema.
- Some herbal and vitamin supplements can interact with certain cancer medications or radiotherapy and may make them less effective.
- If you are having certain drug therapies or radiotherapy, your skin might be irritated or sensitive and so some complementary therapies and products may be unsuitable.

Many complementary therapies are safe. Your medical team should be able to reassure and signpost you to free or affordable services that are used to working with people living with and beyond cancer.



Hints and tips: Talking to your healthcare team

- Talk to your oncology doctor or specialist nurse if you have a question about a particular therapy.
- Ask if they can recommend any complementary therapies that might be safe and useful for you.
- Ask your doctor or nurse to suggest a therapist or recommend a healthcare professional who can advise you about the therapy in question.
- Tell your doctor about any therapies you have used before, are currently using or plan to use. Also tell them if you are following a special diet.

- Show your doctor, nurse, dietitian or pharmacist any tablets, remedies or herbal or vitamin supplements you are taking, even things that aren't related to your cancer. Bring them with you when visiting the hospital, surgery or pharmacy, even if you have used them safely in the past or think they are harmless.

Always tell your medical team about any side-effects or other difficulties you're having – don't try to manage them alone.

Your team can advise you about complementary therapies that might help, but they may also want to adjust your treatment to improve any side-effects, do tests to find out what's causing them, or suggest other treatments that might help you. For example, if you are fatigued, exercise may help you. But if your fatigue is caused by anaemia, you may need a blood transfusion to improve it.

Use the pages at the back of this booklet to write down:

- Any questions you want to ask
- The names of any therapies you're interested in
- A list of any therapies/supplements you have used in the past or are currently using
- Any side-effects or personal difficulties you want help with

What if my team cannot or will not advise me on complementary therapies?

Most healthcare professionals are not experts in complementary therapies. There is also a lack of research into many therapies, so they may not be able to give you detailed information. It might help to show them details of the therapy you are interested in and ask for their best advice.

If they do not know the answer, they may find out for you, give you recommended sources of information or refer you to another healthcare professional, such as a dietitian or pharmacist.

If you feel a member of your cancer team is not open to this conversation, ask them to recommend someone who can answer your questions and advise you. It is part of caring for you to make sure you have information about what is safe for you and what might help you.

You can also get in touch with our Cancer Nurses if you have any questions or want to talk through your thoughts and feelings. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.



Advice from friends and family

Speaking to family, friends and other people living with and beyond cancer can be an important source of support and can help you to cope with your cancer experience. But everyone's situation is different. A complementary therapy that helps one person may not be suitable for you. If someone recommends something, check with your medical team or another healthcare professional before trying it.

Finding a complementary therapist

Cancer support centres

If you are interested in trying complementary therapies during or after your cancer treatment, your local cancer support centre is a good place to start. Cancer support centres provide a range of free services for cancer patients and their families. For example:

- Acupuncture
- Reiki
- Relaxation
- Reflexology
- Art therapy
- Exercise classes
- Massage
- Music therapy
- Yoga

Not all therapies are available in all centres, so call in to your nearest one and see what's available.

Some centres also have sessions with dietitians, who can answer questions about the best diet for you and give you information about dietary supplements. The Irish Cancer Society funds one-to-one professional counselling for patients and their families through many cancer support centres, as well as remotely.

Alliance of Community Cancer Support Centres and Services

Ask if your cancer support centre is a member of the HSE's Alliance of Community Cancer Support Centres and Services. Complementary therapists working at these centres must meet certain standards around their qualifications, training and insurance. See www.healthpromotion.ie/products/nccp-directory-of-community-cancer-support for a directory of centres in the Alliance.

If your local cancer support centre doesn't offer the therapy you're interested in, you can ask them for advice and recommendations on therapists in the area who offer safe care for cancer patients.

If you need help finding support in your area, call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. There's a list of cancer support centres on our website, www.cancer.ie/our-services/local-cancer-support-centres or visit www2.hse.ie/conditions/cancer/support-centres



“ I find the centre so supporting and comforting... The amount of services they provide is fantastic. I was so afraid going in at the beginning but now it's my second home. ”

Finding out about therapists

If you want to try a complementary therapy, you will want to know you are in safe hands. The tips below might help.

- **Choose a therapist who will work together with your doctors and your hospital treatment plan.** The therapist should want to know your medical history, so they can make sure the therapy is safe and suitable for you. Many cancer support centres ask for a letter from your cancer specialist or have a simple form for them to fill in before they start giving any complementary therapies, so that they can check that the therapy is suitable for you.
- **Ask at the hospital or your local cancer support centre for advice and recommendations.**
- **Ask the therapist about their training and experience,** including if they have any experience with cancer patients.
- **Find out what a practitioner needs to do to be accepted as a member of their professional organisation,** if there is one. For example:
 - Do they need certain professional qualifications, for example a diploma?
 - Do they have to have a certain number of hours' experience?
 - Do they need to have insurance?
 - Have they signed up to a professional code of conduct and/or complaints procedure?

Always tell any therapist about your cancer.

Don't overpay

- Many cancer support centres have free complementary therapy sessions.
- If you choose to pay for any therapies, be sure that you're paying a fair price for the therapy or product. Some can be very expensive.
- If there's a professional organisation for the therapy you're interested in, you could ask them roughly what you should be charged.
- Check with your health insurance company or the HSE if they cover the therapy in question.



Need more help?

Talk to one of our Cancer Nurses. Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Talking to therapists

On your first visit to a therapist, expect them to ask about your full medical history, including:

- Any past illnesses
- Your current state of health and information about your diagnosis
- Any treatments that you are currently having or had in the past
- Any medications or supplements you're taking
- Any allergies you have

Hints and tips: Staying safe

Safe therapists will not:

- Claim they can cure or treat your cancer
- Tell you to stop seeing your doctor or other people caring for you
- Tell you to stop taking your medicine or change your standard treatment
- Tell you to stop your standard cancer treatment, for example, chemotherapy
- Ask you to illegally import or conceal products that are not licensed in Ireland
- Provide discounts in exchange for testimonials or promotion of their services
- Provide experimental treatments that are not part of a regulated and ethically approved clinical trial

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Types of complementary therapies and other supports

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Counselling and talking therapies

Talking with a trained professional like a counsellor or to other people in a similar situation may help you to manage your feelings, such as anxiety, anger and sadness. You may also feel more supported and less alone. It can also help you to learn ways to cope emotionally and practically with your diagnosis.

Examples of counselling methods

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT):** With CBT, a therapist will help you to learn new ways of thinking and behaving that can improve your coping skills and help you to manage stress, anxiety and depression.
- **Psychotherapy:** Psychotherapy is a talking therapy where a trained psychotherapist will help you to understand any problems you're having and help you to find ways to cope.

“ I found counselling wonderful, to be able to discuss my thoughts and fears ... getting the tools to help me deal with my anxiety when it strikes, e.g. waiting on scan results. It makes you feel safe and less alone. It has given me hope for the future. I am very happy and content for the moment, even though I have to live with this. It's how I cope. ”

Therapies such as CBT and psychotherapy are often included in hospital care, due to their proven benefits.

Support groups

Support groups bring people together so that they can share experiences and advice and support each other. Support groups may be run by a professional such as a counsellor or nurse, or by the group members. Research has shown that people with cancer in support groups found it improved their mood, helped them to cope better with day-to-day challenges and reduced their pain.

Activity groups are a good way to get support from others while also doing an activity that is fun, reduces stress or gets you active. For example, walking groups or craft groups.



“Friendship and support of others is hugely beneficial to my overall wellbeing. It brought the realisation that I could live life fully and happily.”

Tips

If you're interested in counselling or support groups, take time to find what suits you best. If a particular counsellor or support group doesn't suit you, try something else.

Find out more

- Ask one of our Cancer Nurses for advice on types of talking therapies and how to find services and support groups near you. Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre to talk to a Cancer Nurse.
- The Irish Cancer Society funds one-to-one professional counselling for people affected by cancer. Counselling is available remotely, by phone or video call, or in local cancer support centres. Call our Support Line to find out more.
- Talk to the specialist nurse or medical social worker at the hospital. Ask if your hospital has a psycho-oncology service. This is a team of experts who give emotional and psychological care to people with cancer.



Exercise-based therapies

Research shows that physical activity can really help you after a cancer diagnosis – it can improve your physical and mental health, protect you against some of the downsides of treatment and help you to feel better and stay healthier into the future.

Exercise can help to improve some cancer-related symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety and depression.

Physical activity can also:

- Build up your strength and fitness
- Improve your bone health
- Help you to sleep better
- Improve your mobility and balance
- Help you to keep a healthy weight
- Improve your heart and lung function

Research suggests that being physically active, along with eating a healthy diet, can increase cancer survival rates and help to reduce the risk of some cancers coming back after treatment.

Examples of exercise-based methods

- **Walking:** A regular 30-minute brisk walk can increase your energy levels, improve heart and bone health, help you to stay a healthy weight and lift your mood.
- **Pilates:** Pilates involves small, controlled movements and breathing exercises that aim to increase strength, flexibility and balance, as well as helping you to relax.
- **Yoga:** Yoga is a system of stretches and poses that can increase flexibility, stamina and strength. It also focuses on breathing and meditation to help you to relax, sleep better and feel less stressed. It may also help with fatigue during and after treatment.

Tips

- Most people will benefit from exercise but discuss your exercise plans with your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist before continuing or starting any form of exercise. A combination of aerobic exercise and resistance (strength) exercise is generally recommended for the best benefit, but your hospital team can advise on the type and amount of exercise that's best for you.
- Taking part in an organised group activity can give you support and company, as well as the physical benefits.

You may also be able to access exercise programmes as part of your standard cancer care. Ask your treating team if there are any exercise-based supports available to you. They may also refer you to a physiotherapist.

Find out more

- **Ask at the hospital or your local cancer support centre for information on resources** such as exercise videos, books and special exercise programmes for people with cancer.
- **Call our Support Line or visit a Daffodil Centre and ask our Cancer Nurses about physical activity.** We also fund free exercise classes to help people with cancer improve tiredness/fatigue, improve quality of life, reduce anxiety and build strength and fitness in a fun and supportive way.
- **Many cancer support centres offer groups and classes** for various exercise-based therapies.

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Diet and nutrition

If you have cancer, your diet during and after treatment is very important. A diet with the right balance of protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals is an important part of feeling as well as possible after a cancer diagnosis. Eating plenty of protein is very important for people with cancer, especially when preparing for and recovering from treatment. Aim to have some protein with every meal.

Eating a well-balanced diet, which gives your body the nutrients it needs, can help you to:

- Feel better
- Keep up your energy and strength
- Keep your weight stable
- Avoid muscle loss
- Tolerate your treatment better, so you can feel as well as possible and finish your course of treatment
- Cope better with side-effects of treatment
- Reduce your risk of infection and other complications
- Recover faster

If your diet isn't balanced or you cut out certain foods, it can make you feel more unwell or increase side-effects or symptoms.

What's the best diet for me?

The best diet for you depends on your general health, the type of diet you normally prefer, the type of treatment you're having and if you're having any side-effects or symptoms. For example, after stomach surgery you may need a special diet to make sure you get enough calories. If you're finding it hard to swallow you may need a soft diet. The hospital dietitian can advise you about this.

Tips

Some foods can interfere with cancer treatments. For example, grapefruit juice interacts with many medications. Your registered dietitian, pharmacist or oncologist can give you more advice on possible interactions and foods that should be avoided with your medicine.

Did you know?

Restricting your diet in any way can increase the risk of you not meeting your nutritional needs. You should avoid restrictive diets or cutting out any food groups.

Dietitian or nutritionist? Getting the best advice

The best person to advise you on your diet is a registered dietitian. Dietitians are fully qualified and regulated healthcare professionals. Nutritionists or nutritional therapists may have far less training, so you may get very different advice, depending on who you speak to. Only registered dietitians are qualified to advise people with serious health conditions such as cancer. See page 45 for more on where to get advice and for details of our online information sessions with an oncology (cancer) dietitian.



Hints and tips: Vitamins and minerals

- Vitamins and minerals are important for your health, so try to have a varied, balanced diet that will give you vitamins, minerals and plant substances (phytochemicals). Fresh vegetables and fruit are good sources of phytochemicals.
- Most people get all the nutrients they need from a balanced and varied diet. Your doctor or dietitian will tell you if you need to take a vitamin or mineral supplement. For example, if you're having problems absorbing nutrients from your food. In Ireland, many adults have low levels of vitamin D, especially during the winter months when there is less sunlight (direct sunlight on the skin is a source of vitamin D). Ask your doctor if you might benefit from a vitamin D supplement. Taking too much vitamin D can be harmful, so ask your doctor or pharmacist about the recommended dose.
- Some people with cancer take large amounts of vitamins thinking it will boost their immune system or help their body to fight cancer. There's no evidence for this.
- Large doses of some vitamins and minerals can be harmful or may interfere with your treatment. For example:
 - Too much vitamin A can cause liver or bone damage.
 - Taking vitamin C supplements may interfere with radiotherapy and some chemotherapy drugs and lessen their effect.
 - Folic acid (vitamin B9) supplements may interfere with some cancer drugs. For example, methotrexate.

If you have cancer, don't take supplements without talking to your doctor or dietitian first.



Can diet cure cancer?

Because diet and excess weight are linked to an increased risk of some cancers, some people believe that diet or weight loss can treat or cure cancer. Even if diet or excess weight can play a part in some cancers developing, there is no scientific evidence that any food, diet or weight loss can reverse the disease or cure cancer.

- In most cases, losing weight when you have cancer is not advisable, even if you are overweight or obese. This is because you will likely lose muscle along with fat, which increases your risk of complications.
- It is not true that restricting sugar in your diet will stop a tumour from growing. And restricting your diet may lead to weight loss. It's important to try to keep a healthy weight for your height to feel as well as possible and to keep up your energy and strength.

Is natural safe?

Sometimes people can hear the word 'natural', especially for herbs or plants, and assume this means that they are safe. However, this is not the case. While some herbs and plants are safe and can help, some can also be very harmful.

For example, laetrile, amygdalin or 'vitamin B17' is a substance found in apricot kernels that is promoted as an alternative cancer 'cure'. It is a natural substance, but it is metabolised into cyanide in the body and has caused the deaths of people taking it in the past. It is natural, but it is not safe.

On the other hand, some chemotherapies were originally derived from natural ingredients. For example, taxanes are a class of commonly-used chemotherapies, which were first identified in plants and have been used worldwide as an important treatment for cancer.

Doctors use standard treatments like surgery and chemotherapy because they have been tested and scientifically proven as the best and most effective treatments against cancer. Herbs and plant-based products don't undergo the same strict regulation and controls that each batch of medicine needs to go through before it can be given to a human. This means that you could be taking something that contains harmful doses, is contaminated with other products, or is not actually the product it should be.

If you have cancer, it's important to be very careful with taking and sourcing herbal products and plant extracts. The active ingredients can have unpredictable and harmful effects, and they may interact with your medication.

You should talk to your doctor if you're thinking about taking any herbs or plant extracts or other supplements during your cancer treatment.

Natural does not necessarily mean safe.

Find out more

- Ask to talk to the dietitian at the hospital if you have any questions or want advice on eating the best diet possible or advice about vitamins, supplements or herbal products.
- A pharmacist who is familiar with cancer treatments may be able to advise you about possible interactions between your medication and foods and supplements.
- Our booklet ***Understanding diet and cancer*** has lots of advice on diet in general and specific diets and recipes for different eating problems. You can get a copy from a Daffodil Centre or by calling our Support Line.
- Get advice from one of our Cancer Nurses. Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. Ask them about our free online sessions with an Oncology (cancer) Dietitian.
- If you want to find a dietitian, go to the website of the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, **www.indi.ie**
- Information on diet, recipes and supplements is also available at **<https://breakthroughcancerresearch.ie/cancer-diet>**



Massage therapies

Massage therapies involve rubbing, tapping or pressing the muscles or soft tissues of the body. These types of therapies may help you to relax and feel better in yourself. Massage may also help reduce stiffness and pain, help you to sleep better and improve anxiety and fatigue.

Most massage therapists who have specialised training to give massages to patients with a cancer diagnosis will ask you for a signed consent form from your doctor to say that it is safe for you to have a massage.



Examples of massage therapies

- **Aromatherapy massage:** This involves massaging with essential oils from plants. Certain oils may have particular benefits. For example, lavender oil is said to be relaxing.
- **Shiatsu:** This involves applying pressure on points of the body using thumbs and gentle stretches. It may help to relieve tension or stress and improve fatigue.
- **Reflexology:** Applying pressure to points on the hands and feet. It may help to lift your mood or help you to cope with pain, stress and anxiety.

Tips

- Talk to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse to check if massage is OK for you, considering your treatment and any health conditions or side-effects you have.
- Tell your massage therapist about your cancer and any treatment you have had. Not all types of massage are suitable for cancer patients. For example, people with cancer are advised to avoid vigorous, deep tissue massage.
- Avoid massage immediately after chemotherapy or radiotherapy and in the area of recent surgery, over a known tumour site or on skin that is broken, bleeding, inflamed or bruised.

Massage can be a way of relaxing and taking time out.

Mind-body and spiritual approaches

Mind-body methods are based on the belief that the mind can affect the body. Some mind-body methods may help you to feel more relaxed and better able to cope with your illness and treatment.

Research shows that mindfulness-based interventions are among the most effective complementary approaches for depression, anxiety and fatigue.

Examples of mind-body methods

- **Meditation:** Meditation involves techniques such as focused breathing or repetition of words to calm your mind and help you to enter a state of stillness and deep relaxation.

- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness means being aware and present in each moment. Mindfulness is a type of meditation that focuses your mind in the present to reduce anxiety and improve mental wellbeing.
- **Relaxation techniques:** Breathing and muscle relaxation exercises to reduce stress, increase wellbeing and improve blood pressure and muscle tension.
- **Tai Chi/Qigong:** Low-impact, slow-motion exercises, incorporating mindfulness/meditative mindsets, controlled breathing and gentle movements. They may help you to feel better in yourself, sleep better and improve anxiety, depression and fatigue.



Find out more

- Many cancer support centres have classes where you can learn and practise these techniques.
- You can ask one of our Cancer Nurses for advice on mind-body methods and how to find services near you. Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre to talk to a Cancer Nurse.

Creative therapies

Creative therapies may boost your self-esteem and help you to release negative emotions, relax and feel more positive.

Examples of creative therapies

- **Music therapy:** Listening, playing or singing may calm your mind and body, improve depression and fatigue and reduce pain and anxiety.
- **Art therapy:** Using paint, sculpture, drawing or art appreciation to explore and express your feelings. It can be done in groups or individually.
- **Creative writing:** Writing can help you to find your voice, express your creativity and explore your emotions in a safe, supportive environment.

Tips

- **Make sure the therapist is well qualified**, so that they can help you manage any strong emotions you may have during the session.
- **If you don't want to visit a therapist or group session, you can write a diary, listen to music or create art at home.** Search 'writing for cancer' online to find tips and prompts to help you get started with therapeutic writing.

Find out more

- Many cancer support centres have classes where you can learn and practise these techniques.
- The Irish Cancer Society has free creative arts therapies for children, adolescents and young adults up to age 24, during or after treatment. It is also available for siblings of young people with cancer. Our creative arts therapy includes art therapy, dance-movement therapy, drama therapy and music therapy. Email creativeartstherapy@irishcancer.ie for information.

Energy therapies

These therapies are based on the belief that the body has energy fields that can be used to promote wellbeing. There's evidence that some of these therapies may help you to feel better in yourself or improve some of the side-effects of cancer and its treatment. There's no evidence that they can treat or cure cancer.



Examples of energy therapies

- **Acupuncture:** This involves puncturing the skin with tiny, hair-thin needles, which are left in place for a few minutes then removed. Acupuncture may help symptoms like pain, insomnia, fatigue, dry mouth, breathlessness, feeling sick and hot flushes. It may also help to reduce anxiety and help you feel more relaxed.

- **Reiki:** Reiki ('ray-key') involves a practitioner placing their hands in a series of positions on or over your body using gentle strokes or touches. There is no scientific evidence to prove that Reiki can treat or cure cancer, but it may help to reduce stress, fatigue and pain, help you to feel more relaxed and improve your mood.
- **Qigong:** Qigong combines movement, meditation and breathing exercises. It may help you to feel less stressed and better in yourself. It may also help with symptoms such as pain, fatigue and nausea.

Acupuncture is not suitable for everyone. For example, people with a low white blood cell or platelet count. You should always check with your treating team if you are considering acupuncture.

Find out more

- Call our Support Line or visit a Daffodil Centre for advice on finding a reputable practitioner.
- Many cancer support centres run free energy therapy sessions, for example, Reiki. See our website www.cancer.ie/support to find a centre near to you.

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700



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Making sense of health claims

It can be hard to make sense of information about complementary and alternative therapies.



Scientific research – is there evidence it works?

All standard (conventional) cancer treatments have been robustly tested for many years using proper scientific methods. The problem when trying to find out about a complementary therapy is that often there is very little good-quality evidence. It can be very tricky to tell if the information that you are reading is useful or not.

Where there is scientific research into complementary therapies, it usually researches a particular therapy used in a particular way. For example, 'Does acupuncture help with fatigue? Does mindfulness help with sleep problems?' So even if there's evidence a therapy helps with one thing, that doesn't mean it will help with something else.

Sometimes you may read about how a particular therapy helped a person or see what seems to be very convincing 'evidence' about a miracle cure. However, just because there are claims about evidence, it does not mean that the evidence is of a good quality. It is important to be careful about the sources of information and the types of evidence.

Here are some things to watch out for:

Personal experiences: Using individual patient stories and testimonials as 'proof' for the therapy, rather than scientific research studies. This is a sign that there may not be much real scientific evidence behind the claims being made.

Describing the therapy as a cure for cancer: The only treatments that have been scientifically proven to cure cancer are conventional treatments like chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapies, radiotherapy and surgery.

Cherry-picking: A news feature or article might only mention some of the data. Not having all the data and context from the original source material may give a wrong impression about the evidence.

Can the source be trusted? Legitimate sources should always have references and a list of places where they got the information. Trusted scientific data tends to come from original research articles from legitimate journals. Information from reputable organisations such as the HSE, NHS, World Health Organisation and the World Cancer Research Fund is based on reliable sources.

Check on respected cancer organisations' websites to see if there's any evidence to back up the claims being made.

Exaggerating the benefits: There may be scientific research to prove that a therapy has a particular effect – for example, it may reduce swelling, have antioxidant effects or speed up healing. But this doesn't mean that it can cure or control cancer. Read carefully to see what the **proven** effects of a therapy are and check that this matches the benefits it claims to have.

Laboratory or animal studies: Sometimes you may read about a therapy killing cancer cells in a laboratory or working on animals like rats or mice. Sometimes when these therapies are tested in humans they prove to be useful, but other times the beneficial effect doesn't happen or they may not be safe for humans.



Unless a therapy has gone through human trials, there's no way of knowing if it will be helpful and safe or not.

Selling products or information relating to the therapy: If someone is making money from selling products or treatments, there's more reason for them to exaggerate the benefits or give misleading or incomplete information.

Someone claiming something works and supporting this by referring to their credentials or their personal experience, rather than any independent evidence: Some people who are qualified healthcare professionals or scientists may promote therapies that are not evidence-based. It can happen for profit or because the individual has been misguided themselves. You should not trust professionals just because they have qualifications or credentials. They should always be able to provide evidence to support their practice or claims.

How to check health claims

- Talk to your doctor.
- Use independent, reliable websites, like cancer organisations' and government health websites for information. Some are listed on the next page.
- Ask our research team. They have spent many years studying scientific methods and are happy to answer questions on health claims. They can be contacted by emailing research@irishcancer.ie
- Find out about the website – do they have contact details, information about the qualifications of the person writing the information or any sponsors?



Information about complementary and alternative therapies

There is a lot of information available on complementary and alternative therapies, so it's important to use reliable, trusted sources.

Cancer Research UK: www.cruk.org

General information on complementary therapies and information on selected individual therapies, based on research evidence.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Cancer: www.cam-cancer.org

Summaries of the benefits and risks of different therapies, based on research evidence.

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, About Herbs, Botanicals and Other Products:

www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs/search

Large database of herbs, plants and other products and treatments, with evidence-based information on their:

- Uses
- Risks
- Benefits
- Known interactions with other herbs or medicines

Irish Cancer Society: www.cancer.ie

Information about complementary therapies, standard treatments and cancer myths. You can also ask our research team questions about complementary therapies by emailing research@irishcancer.ie

World Cancer Research Fund:

<https://www.wcrf.org/living-well/living-with-cancer/your-questions-answered>

Evidence-based advice on living well, including diet and exercise information.

Breakthrough Cancer Research

<https://breakthroughcancerresearch.ie/cancer-diet>

Information on diet, supplements and cancer.

<https://breakthroughcancerresearch.ie/books>

Books on cancer and diet.

CORU: www.coru.ie

Body that regulates dietitians, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and other health and social care professionals. You can check the CORU register to find people who have met CORU's professional conduct, education, training and competence standards.



What does that word mean?

Alternative therapies: Scientifically unproven therapies used instead of conventional medicine.

Anecdotal evidence: Information passed by word-of-mouth but not recorded scientifically, such as personal stories.

Antioxidants: Chemicals such as vitamins, enzymes and minerals which protect your body from other chemicals called free radicals that cause cell damage. Antioxidants are found in foods such as berries, broccoli, tomatoes, red grapes, garlic, spinach, tea and carrots. Well-known antioxidants include vitamin A, vitamin C and vitamin E. See also free radicals.

Bodywork: A term that refers to therapies such as massage and deep tissue manipulation that aim to improve the structure and working of your body.

CAM: Complementary and alternative medicine.

Chemotherapy: A treatment to cure or control cancer using drugs.

Complementary therapies: A way of promoting health and wellbeing using therapies that can be used alongside conventional medicine.

Conventional medicine: A way of treating people based on scientific evidence.

Dietitians: Dietitians are health professionals who are experts in nutrition and the human diet. Dietitians use scientific research, nutrition, behavioural science and social science to promote health, prevent disease and shape the dietary choices of healthy and sick people. Nutritionists and nutritional therapists are not qualified to support people with serious conditions and are not CORU-regulated professions (see the previous page).

Eastern medicine: A broad term for therapies that began in Asian countries like China, Tibet, Japan, India and Thailand. These therapies are generally not based on scientific evidence but have been used for centuries.

Essential oil: An oily liquid that is taken from some plants by distillation or cold pressing. The word essential refers to the fragrant essence of the plant.

Free radicals: Highly reactive chemicals that often contain oxygen or nitrogen. They are formed naturally in your body as a byproduct of chemical reactions. They are linked to cancer because they can cause cell damage.

Holistic: An approach to health that considers the whole body and environment when offering treatment. It focuses on the mind, body and spirit of a person rather than on the body and disease only. Sometimes this is known as whole-person health.

Home remedy: Foods or common household items that are used to treat an illness or ailment. Usually it arises from tradition or habit.

Integrative medicine: This combines conventional medicine with complementary therapies.

Metabolism: All the chemical changes that take place in your body. These occur when food is taken in to make energy and allow your body to grow.

Natural products: Chemicals that occur in nature. This does not mean that they are safe but that they are found in the natural environment.

Orthodox medicine: Another name for standard, evidence-based medicine.

Physiotherapist: Physiotherapists use evidence-based approaches to help relieve pain and treat or prevent physical difficulties to improve your movement and ability to function independently. Physical therapist sounds similar but it is not a CORU-regulated profession (see page 60).

Physiotherapy: The use of physical means – massage, exercise, heat or electricity – to relieve pain, restore movement and muscle strength. It is based on medical science and is part of conventional medicine.

Placebo effect: Something positive that happens when you are given a harmless substance with no active ingredient. For example, as a pill, liquid, powder or injection. It produces an effect, not due to the drug or therapy, but because you expect something positive will happen. It includes the power of suggestion.

Practitioner: A person who performs conventional, complementary or alternative therapies.

Radiotherapy: A treatment for cancer using high-energy X-rays.

Standard medicine: Another name for conventional medicine.

Therapist: A person who delivers a particular type of therapy.

Traditional medicine: This term can have two meanings. (1) Medical techniques developed and used before the age of modern medicine. These can include herbal medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine and homeopathy. (2) Modern medicine may be described as 'traditional medicine', especially by those offering alternative therapies.

Wellness care: Another name for complementary therapies.

Western medicine: Usually refers to therapies that began and developed in Europe and North America, and which are based on scientific evidence.

Notes/Questions

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This booklet has been produced by the Irish Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication, information and support for cancer patients and their families throughout diagnosis and treatment. We would like to thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and advice made this publication possible. We especially thank the people who generously shared their personal experiences in this booklet. We also acknowledge the contribution of the many consultants, nurses and other healthcare professionals and complementary therapists who so kindly gave their time and expertise to contribute to previous editions of this booklet.

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Roz Flaherty, Support Line Cancer Nurse (now retired)

Sarah Lane

This booklet offers information only and does not replace medical advice. The inclusion of any complementary or alternative therapy does not mean it is endorsed by the Irish Cancer Society. All therapies as described in the booklet should be used with caution by cancer patients, and only after talking to their doctor.

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Join the Irish Cancer Society team

If you want to make a difference to people affected by cancer, join our team! Visit www.cancer.ie if you want to get involved.

Support people affected by cancer

Reaching out directly to people with cancer is one of the most rewarding ways to help:

- Help people needing lifts to hospital by becoming a volunteer driver
- Give one-on-one support to someone newly diagnosed with cancer as part of our Peer Support programme
- Give information and support to people concerned about or affected by cancer at one of our hospital-based Daffodil Centres

Share your experiences

Use your voice to bring reassurance to cancer patients and their families, help people to connect with our services or inspire them to get involved as a volunteer:

- Share your cancer story
- Tell people about our services
- Describe what it's like to organise or take part in a fundraising event

Raise money

All our services are funded by the public's generosity:

- Donate direct
- Take part in one of our fundraising events or challenges
- Organise your own event

Did you like this booklet?

We would love to hear your comments or suggestions.
Please email reviewers@irishcancer.ie



Our cancer nurses are here for you:

- Support Line Freephone **1800 200 700**
- Email **supportline@irishcancer.ie**
- Contact your nearest Daffodil Centre