

The information provided on this page is for people with hepatitis C who want to know more about complementary and alternative therapies. It is intended as an introductory guide only. Anecdotally, good results have been reported by some people using complementary therapies but others have found no observable benefits—and, as with any treatment, it's important to remember that excessive or wrongly prescribed therapies can cause damage to the liver.

What do the terms 'complementary' and 'alternative' mean?

These terms describe types of medicine that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine.

'Complementary therapy' refers to a health practice when it is used alongside a conventional or mainstream health care approach.

'Alternative therapy' refers to a health practice that is not a conventional or mainstream health care approach.

Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably.

Why choose complementary and alternative therapies?

Reasons why people with hepatitis C choose complementary and alternative therapies include:

- to improve quality of life by relieving symptoms of chronic infection and/or reduce side effects of conventional treatment;
- to take an active role in decisions about their health care;
- cultural influences;
- dissatisfaction with conventional approaches to health care; and
- concerns about perceived or reported toxicity of conventional prescription medicines.

How effective are complementary and alternative therapies for hepatitis C?

Many people worldwide have found an increase in well-being through using complementary therapies, whether they have hepatitis C or not. However, there is limited research into the effectiveness of complementary and alternative therapies for hepatitis C.

Some people with hepatitis C report good results while using complementary or alternative therapies, while others notice few benefits.

If you pursue complementary and alternative therapies it is important that you tell your liver specialist and GP of any therapies that you have recently used, are using, or plan to use. Your complementary/alternative practitioner should also be aware of what conventional treatments you are accessing. As a rule, every practitioner you see, whether they use conventional or alternative/complementary medicine needs to know of all the therapies you are using. This information will help the practitioner protect your health.

How to choose a practitioner

Some complementary/alternative practitioners are registered with professional bodies, so choose a practitioner who is properly qualified, knows about hepatitis C, and preferably has experience working with people who have hepatitis C and/or other chronic liver disease.

In making this choice, you could consider asking the complementary/alternative practitioner:

- what qualifications or training they have in relation to particular therapies;
- whether they are a registered member of a professional association for that particular therapy;
- what they know about hepatitis C;

- what experience they have working with people who have hepatitis C;
- about the therapy and its benefits to you, including:
 - number of treatment sessions and length of treatment;
 - what it will require of you;
 - how it might improve your health;
 - the risks of the therapy;
 - how the therapy works in combination with other therapies or conventional treatments;
 - what are all the likely costs and charges of this therapy; and
 - if they are willing and able to visit you at your home or in hospital if necessary.

Hepatitis Councils, liver clinics and some gastroenterologists in each State and Territory can refer people to reputable practitioners.

Examples of complementary and alternative therapies

The information on the therapies listed below is provided as a guide only. Anyone considering these therapies should discuss their use with a qualified complementary/alternative practitioner and their doctor, as excessive or wrongly prescribed therapies can cause damage to the liver.

Therapy	Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)
What is it?	The use of different techniques designed to keep the energy (or qi) flowing smoothly through the body's channels (called meridians).
Principle	Where good health is seen as a function of a balance between the heart, liver, spleen, kidneys and lungs. When there is an imbalance between or within the energy in these organs, disease can occur.
Method	Treatment usually consists of a combination of acupuncture, herbs, dietary changes, massage and exercise.
Benefits	A form of medicine which can be appealing to people who wish to avoid the side effects of pharmaceutical drugs like interferon. TCM treatments will vary according to the patient, but can address secondary conditions which have developed from hepatitis C infection. TCM practitioners will also consider the emotional and physiological effects of hepatitis C in their treatment.
Therapy	Acupuncture
What is it?	An ancient system of healing developed as part of the traditional medicine of China, Japan and other Eastern countries.
Principle	Regulates the flow of qi, which travels through the body's meridians (channels) and connects acupuncture points to tissues and organs. Hepatitis is characterised by stagnation in liver qi and an excess of damp heat, reflecting the presence of the virus. Acupuncture will be applied to stimulate the energy and help clear blockages as well as keeping the liver cool and moist.
Method	Fine needles are inserted into the skin at specific points on the body to stimulate the qi, unblock the meridians and restore organ function. Some practitioners will use other treatment methods including moxibustion (warming), cupping, electro-stimulation, massage and Chinese herbs.

Therapy	Acupuncture
Benefits	Individual responses vary. Patients may generally feel relaxed after treatment and find improvements in sleep, digestion and energy levels.
Therapy	Aromatherapy
What is it?	The use of pure essential oils to seek to influence the mind, body or spirit, physiology or mood.
Principle	To awaken and strengthen the vital energies and self-healing capabilities, thereby having a direct effect on the body, mind and soul.
Method	Essential oils can be massaged directly into the skin, inhaled through vaporisers, or added to water baths. With poor liver function, care should be taken with the amount of oil used on the skin. A light application on the skin in the first instance will help determine a person's response.
Benefits	When absorbed through the skin, essential oils can reach the organs to be treated through connective and lymphatic tissues and the circulatory system. Essential oils have the capacity to affect the brain (through the senses of touch and smell) and consequently psychological and physiological processes.
Therapy	Naturopathy
What is it	A system of health care using specific diets, regular exercise and avoiding drugs or anything artificial.
Principle	That living systems have an inherent ability to establish, maintain and restore health. The emphasis is on restoring health rather than treating disease.
Method	Treatment will vary depending on the individual, but may include use of substances (or herbs) that slowly modify the internal environment and recommending dietary and lifestyle changes.
Benefits	Results will vary. Many people experience a greater sense of well-being after undertaking some of the recommended dietary changes and taking the herbs and vitamins.
Therapy	Manipulative and body based systems
What is it?	Systems of therapy based on manipulation and/or movement of the body. It includes chiropractic medicine, osteopathic medicine, reflexology, Swedish massage and Rolfing.
Principle	Based on the belief that all of the body's systems work together and disturbances in one system may impact upon function elsewhere in the body. Practitioners focus on the relationship between body structure and function and how it affects the preservation and restoration of health.

Therapy	Manipulative and body based systems
Method	Procedures will vary. Manipulative therapy is an integral treatment tool for chiropractors. Osteopaths, who place emphasis on the musculoskeletal system, may practise osteopathic manipulation. Massage therapists manipulate the soft tissues of the body to assist with relaxation.
Benefits	Individual results will vary. Some practitioners theorise that the ability to relax is closely linked to the effectiveness of fighting infections.
Therapy	Energy therapies
What is it?	Therapies which focus either on energy fields originating from within the body (biofields) or those from other sources (electromagnetic fields). It includes Reiki, Qi Gong and therapeutic touch.
Principle	With an emphasis on the health of internal organs rather than muscular strength, these methods aim to open up the internal energy channels to embrace mental and emotional balance, together with improved physical strength and vitality.
Method	Some forms of energy therapy use pressure or body manipulation by placing the hands in, or through, the biofields.
Benefits	Designed to improve the health of the liver and increase overall energy levels. As they also help with relaxation, the immune system may benefit.
Therapy	Mind-body interventions
What is it?	Systems that use a variety of techniques designed to facilitate the mind's capacity to affect bodily functions and symptoms. It includes meditation, yoga and Tai Chi.
Principle	Based on ancient disciplines that aim to establish a balance between the body and mind.
Method	Yoga techniques include deep breathing, stretching and meditation. Tai Chi is a series of slow, rhythmic movements.
Benefits	These systems promote the benefits as relaxed mental and physical states, calmness, well-being and increased energy levels.
Therapy	Vitamins and minerals
What is it?	Food supplements containing extracts of natural substances which can be taken orally to assist with body functions. Vitamins are divided into fat soluble and water soluble vitamins. Mineral categories include micro-and macro-minerals.
Principle	To supplement a deficiency in the diet and assist with specific nutritional needs, based on providing the recommended daily allowance (RDA).

Therapy	Vitamins and minerals
Method	The use of vitamins and minerals is based on individual needs.
Benefits	Many vitamins and dietary supplements frequently assist with overall well-being.
Therapy	Herbalism
What is it?	The oldest form of medicine which only uses plants and herbs in the treatment of conditions. The biological complexity of humans is ideally matched with treatments based on the biological complexity of plants.
Principle	That people have an innate ability to heal themselves and that medicine use should support the body's own self-healing mechanism. The emphasis of herbalism is to strengthen the body's defensive system rather than attack the disease.
Method	Herbal treatment will vary for individuals. A person's symptoms, overall health and diet, lifestyle and exercise will be assessed for an appropriate herbal treatment to be prescribed. Herbs may be taken as an infusion, in gelatin capsules, as a decoction or in tinctures.
Benefits	Can be of benefit in providing immediate symptomatic relief to people suffering from headache, cold and flu. Long-term treatment strategies may manage to clear symptoms of hepatitis C infection.

Commonly used herbs by people with hepatitis C

Although specific natural therapies have been used for chronic hepatitis C infection and the associated symptoms, there haven't been many scientific trials to investigate their effectiveness. With the currently limited information available it is difficult to make any formal recommendations however the more commonly used herbs by people with hepatitis C are:

- St Mary's Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) also known as Milk Thistle;
- Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*);
- Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*); and
- CH100.

If you are currently taking conventional treatments, talk to your doctor about using these herbs as they may cause side effects. For more detailed information about the herbs listed above download Hepatitis Australia publication on Complementary & Alternative Therapies from www.hepatitisaustralia.com

Herbs that can damage the liver

Some herbs and combinations of herbs can be harmful to the liver and therefore potentially dangerous for people with hepatitis C. The following list is not exhaustive, but indicates some of the herbs people with hepatitis C may want to avoid:

- Barberry
- Chaparral
- Creosote bush
- Gordolobo yerba tea
- Greater celandine
- Jamaican bush tea
- Kombucha tea
- Senna
- Black cohosh
- Comfrey
- Germander
- Greasewood
- False pennyroyal
- Jin Bu Huan
- Sassafras
- White chameleon

For more information

For further information on hepatitis C please contact the national infoline 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222). The infoline diverts to information and support lines at your local state or territory hepatitis council.

Some of the information on hepatitis C above has been abridged from various resources, these resources include:

Complementary and Alternative Therapies (Hepatitis Australia)—can be ordered from your local Hepatitis Council (ph. 1300 437 222) or download PDF from www.hepatitisaustralia.com

Other useful sites on Complementary & Alternative Therapies include:

www.nhaa.org.au

www.acupuncture.org.au