

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES



**NATIONAL
PSORIASIS
FOUNDATION®**

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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

WHAT IS PSORIASIS?

Psoriasis is a noncontagious, lifelong skin disease. According to the National Institutes of Health, as many as 7.5 million Americans have psoriasis. The most common form, plaque [pronounced plak] psoriasis, appears as raised, red lesions covered with a silvery white buildup of dead skin cells, called scale.

About 10 percent to 30 percent of people with psoriasis also develop psoriatic [sore-ee-AA-tic] arthritis, which causes pain, stiffness and swelling in and around the joints. The hands, feet, wrists, ankles, knees and lower back are most often affected by this type of arthritis.



Three percent to 10 percent of the body affected by psoriasis is considered to be a moderate case. More than 10 percent is considered severe. The palm of the hand equals 1 percent of the skin. However, the severity of psoriasis is also measured by how psoriasis affects a person's quality of life. Psoriasis can have a serious impact even if it involves a small area, such as the palms of the hands or soles of the feet.

To learn more about the types of psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis, contact the National Psoriasis Foundation and request the following booklets:

- *Psoriatic Arthritis*
- *Specific Forms of Psoriasis*

Acupuncture, herbal remedies, meditation, magnets—at one time, many people would have thought it absurd to try such things to treat the symptoms of psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. But as more people become active partners in their treatment, interest in alternative medicine has grown. A survey released in May 2004 conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) and the National Center for Health Statistics found that in 2002, 36 percent of U.S. adults were using some form of complementary and alternative medicine.

Conventional (allopathic) medicine is adjusting to this trend. Both patients and doctors have become more open to trying alternative approaches. Terms like “integrative” or “complementary” are often used to describe these treatments. The NCCAM defines complementary and alternative medicine as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices and products that are not presently considered part of traditional allopathic medicine. Complementary medicine is used together with conventional medicine, whereas alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine.

While complementary and alternative treatments are becoming more common, it is important to note that to date they have not been tested and studied to the same extent as allopathic medical treatments. Furthermore, it is difficult to come to a conclusive statement regarding their effectiveness because they are administered differently from practitioner to practitioner.

Every day, the National Psoriasis Foundation hears from its members and the public about nontraditional treatments. The Psoriasis Foundation does not endorse or recommend any treatments for psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis. We also do not dismiss any treatment that may be working for someone—whether that treatment is traditional or alternative.

The information in this booklet is not meant to encourage treatment of your psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis on your own. Check with your doctor before beginning any new treatment. And always make sure your doctor is aware of any natural or herbal product (including vitamins and supplements) you are using, as some may interact with prescription medications. The treatment options discussed in this booklet are meant for the consideration of generally healthy adults—not infants, children, pregnant women or the elderly.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE DISCIPLINES

There are several schools of medicine outside of Western medicine. Some people look to all or part of these disciplines to complement their traditional treatment, or they may choose to treat themselves exclusively with Ayurvedic, Chinese, homeopathic or naturopathic medicine. Acupuncture and chiropractic medicine may also be incorporated into a discipline, such as Chinese medicine, or be used independent of other regimens.

What follows are definitions of these disciplines and the manner in which each treats the disease. Specific treatment regimens vary depending on the practitioner.

Acupuncture

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, most pain conditions and diseases are caused by an imbalance or a blockage of energy circulating in the body. Acupuncture is used to restore the proper flow of energy and the body toward balance. In an acupuncture treatment, thin sterile needles are inserted at specific points on the body. These points are selected according to the patient's problem.

Reports from people with psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis are mixed: Some say acupuncture helps their disease while others report no effect. People who try acupuncture and improve say it takes many treatments. Acupuncture has few known side effects.

According to the National Institutes of Health, acupuncture is an acceptable treatment for many pain conditions. Studies have shown that acupuncture helps relieve pain from fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis.

Ayurvedic medicine

Ayurvedic [I-yur-vay-dik] medicine originated in India more than 5,000 years ago. Prevention is the key to Ayurvedic medicine. It encourages attention to balance in one's life through diet, herbs, lifestyle and "right thinking."

According to supporters of Ayurvedic medicine, managing disease and restoring health involve assessing the whole person to understand the nature of the imbalance. For psoriasis, a specific treatment regimen might involve topical application of certain oils, such as sesame or mustard; fasting and other dietary guidelines; elimination of stress; and regular physical exercise.

Chinese medicine

For more than 3,000 years, many people have used Chinese medicine (also known as Traditional Chinese Medicine) to treat and prevent diseases. It is a complex healthcare system that includes acupuncture, herbs, massage, nutrition and exercise. Practitioners often personalize their Chinese medicine practice to suit their own area of expertise. They also tailor a treatment regimen to each patient.

Herbs, combined in unique formulations for each individual patient, are one of the primary treatments. More than 300 herbs commonly used today have a history of use that goes back at least 2,000 years. In the treatment of psoriasis, oral and topical herbal treatments are used.

Use caution with all herbals: Some make the skin more sensitive to ultraviolet light, while others may interact with other prescriptions or medications.

In trained hands, the centuries of wisdom behind Chinese medicine may be able to help some people. However, Chinese herbs are available in the U.S. as food supplements, not as drugs. Therefore, they are not strictly regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, except for monitoring the cleanliness of manufacturing facilities. Random testing of crude herb materials and herb products made in the U.S. indicate that they are free of harmful contaminants. Imported products must be used with caution. Chinese herbals should be taken only as prescribed by a trained health professional.

Chiropractic

Chiropractic medicine is the practice of manipulating

the spine for therapeutic benefit. It began in the United States in the late 1800s and is now a widely recognized alternative treatment.

The Psoriasis Foundation is unaware of any clinical studies on the usefulness of chiropractic medicine in treating psoriasis. However, John O.A. Pagano, D.C., a New Jersey chiropractor, has published a regimen for treating psoriasis that includes spinal manipulations.

Homeopathic medicine

Homeopathy is a school of medicine based on the premise that “like cures like.” Practitioners believe that substances that produce certain symptoms in a healthy person can cure diseases that have similar symptoms. As an example, homeopathic doctors might use a natural product known to cause stomach irritation in a healthy person and administer it in a greatly diluted form to treat someone with a stomach ulcer.

People report success with homeopathic treatments for psoriasis, including sulfur and nickel. Homeopathic remedies are usually so diluted that they will not cause major side effects. A consultation with someone trained in this practice will help guide the treatment and ensure your safety.

Naturopathic medicine

Naturopathic medicine is a distinct system of primary health care distinguished by these principles:

- Nature has the power to heal.
- First do no harm.
- Identify and treat the causes of illness.
- Treat the whole person.
- The doctor acts as a teacher.
- Prevention is paramount.

Treatment methods are consistent with these principles and are based on the individual patient.

Naturopathic practice excludes major surgery and the use of most synthetic drugs. Naturopathic treatments can complement those used by conventionally trained doctors. How a naturopathic doctor treats psoriasis varies from practitioner to practitioner.

The number of naturopathic doctors is increasing, but naturopathic medicine is not licensed in all 50 states. In states without licensing, look for a member of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians. Membership means that a person has met appropriate standards.

Questions to ask

If you decide to seek medical care from an alternative medicine practitioner, ask him or her these questions before beginning treatment:

- Are you licensed to use this treatment?
- Do you have experience and success treating psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis?
- How many patients have you successfully treated?
- What is the length and cost of the proposed treatment?
- What are reasonable expectations for improvement based on your experience treating patients with similar conditions?
- What are the risks or possible side effects of the treatment under consideration?
- How long have you been administering this treatment?

- What are your other areas of expertise?
- What other kinds of problems do you treat?
- Are your professional references available?

MIND AND BODY

There is clear scientific evidence that stress triggers or aggravates psoriasis in some people. Practices that promote relaxation and stress reduction can help people with psoriasis manage their disease. These techniques, however, seem to work best when used to supplement, not replace, medical treatments.

Massage

The benefits of massage are gaining increased acceptance by the medical community. Massage professionals as well as health care providers in hospital settings and doctors' offices use it to relieve muscle tension, reduce stress and induce relaxation. Massage therapy is also shown to relieve and manage chronic and acute pain. Individuals with psoriatic arthritis may find that massage helps relieve joint pain.

Different types include Swedish massage, deep tissue massage, reflexology, shiatsu and acupuncture. Discuss with your massage therapist which type will work best for you. Psoriasis Foundation members suggest that when making an appointment, it is a good idea to tell the receptionist that you have psoriasis.

Meditation

Meditation is the practice of focusing continuously on one thought, phrase or prayer for a period of time. Meditation improves the immune system and reduces heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, oxygen consumption, blood flow to skeletal muscles, perspiration and muscle tension.

One study, conducted by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., former professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts, examined the use of meditation-based relaxation tapes in psoriasis patients undergoing ultraviolet light (UV) treatments. Patients who listened to the tapes during treatments cleared faster—in some cases, twice as fast—than patients who had the light treatment alone. Mindfulness Meditation Practice Tapes, the tapes used in this study, are available by visiting www.mindfulnessstapes.com.

Lynn W. Brallier, Ph.D., M.S.N., R.N., director of the Stress and Health Management Center in Washington, D.C., also produces tapes and CDs designed to reduce stress through guided imagery. Her tape, *Nurturing Your Immune System*, addresses immune functioning and stress. Selections can be ordered by calling 888.553.4010.

Yoga

Yoga involves controlled breathing, stretching and strengthening exercises, and meditation. Yoga is thought to promote physical, mental and spiritual well-being. People of all ages and physical conditions can practice yoga. As a complementary medical treatment, it is a well-recognized method of relaxation. There are many different types of yoga, but all are based on the fundamental idea of uniting mind and body. Proponents of yoga believe that when the body is controlled through yoga's careful positions, muscles relax and circulation improves—thus releasing tension and stress.

Some people with psoriatic arthritis anecdotally report that yoga can help ease pain and improve range of motion.

Other mind and body therapies

Other mind and body therapies include aromatherapy, visualization and guided imagery, progressive relaxation, tai chi, prayer/spiritual practices, reflexology, electromagnetic therapies and art therapy. Little data exists to measure the effectiveness of these therapies in treating psoriasis.

DIET

Many people report that certain foods aggravate or improve their skin. People with psoriasis benefit from a healthy lifestyle and eating habits, just like everybody else. However, several dietary regimens have been put forth with claims of improving psoriasis. There are no conclusive studies to verify these claims.

For more information, request the Psoriasis Foundation educational booklet *Your Diet & Psoriasis*.

SUN AND WATER

Climatotherapy is the use of sunlight and water to treat psoriasis. Sunlight can be a valuable treatment option for people with psoriasis. Climatotherapy is available at sites around the world.

Balneotherapy is a general term used for water-based treatments involving natural thermal, spring, mineral or seawater to induce relaxation, improve circulation and stimulate the immune system.

For more information, request the Psoriasis Foundation educational booklet *Sun & Water Therapy*.

TOPICAL PRODUCTS

The following natural treatments have been studied, proven or mentioned in conjunction with psoriasis in the medical community or have been brought to

our attention by a significant number of Psoriasis Foundation members.

Aloe

Aloe is a member of the lily family and is a common houseplant. Although there are approximately 500 species, the best known is aloe vera. Aloe vera looks like a cactus with soft leaves. The fluid contained in the leaves has been used for centuries to treat burns and minor wounds. Today, aloe gel is used frequently as an ingredient in cosmetics, creams, ointments and suntan lotions.

A study published in 1996 in *Tropical Medicine and International Health* found that aloe vera was very effective in the treatment of psoriasis. By the end of the 16-week study, a cream with aloe vera extract caused a significant clearing of psoriasis in 25 of 30 patients, compared to two out of 30 with the placebo. However, a study published in May 2005 in the *Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology* found that the effect of commercial aloe vera gel on stable plaque psoriasis was modest and not much better than placebo.

Apple cider vinegar

Many ancient cultures used different types of vinegar (derived from dates, figs, etc.) for medicinal purposes. Apple cider vinegar has been used throughout the years as a disinfectant or soothing agent.

The Psoriasis Foundation hears from people who apply apple cider vinegar to their skin as a treatment for psoriasis. People add it to the bath, mix it with a moisturizer, soak fingernails and toenails in it, and apply it directly to the skin with cotton balls or pads. The vinegar can be purchased at the grocery store.

Capsaicin

Capsaicin, a natural ingredient found in cayenne peppers, has been shown in some studies to work on redness, scaling and itching of the skin. Researchers have shown that capsaicin interrupts the action of substance P, (a molecule which affects how the brain recognizes pain and itch sensations) at the nerve ending. Many over-the-counter topical pain-relief products for arthritis contain capsaicin.

In two separate studies with psoriasis patients, 0.025% capsaicin cream used topically was effective in decreasing scaling and redness. The main side effect was a short-lived burning sensation. Several studies indicate that topical capsaicin products can also help reduce joint pain associated with psoriatic arthritis. Capsaicin can cause a severe burning sensation if it comes in contact with the eyes, nasal passages or mucous membranes. Capsaicin may be found in lotions, creams, therapeutic patches and ointments available at drugstores.

Emu oil

Emu oil can be found in cosmetic products touted for their protective and softening effects on the skin. The exact mechanism by which emu oil works is not known. Emu oil can be difficult to obtain and may be relatively expensive. No health benefits have yet been established.

Evening primrose oil

Many studies have evaluated topical creams and lotions containing evening primrose oil in treating the skin condition eczema. All report reduction of the primary symptoms of eczema and the overall severity of the skin disorder. No studies have been conducted

to evaluate the use of evening primrose oil in treating psoriasis.

No side effects have been reported with evening primrose oil, and there have been no complaints concerning its safety for topical use.

Evening primrose oil can also be taken orally as a dietary supplement. For more information, request the Psoriasis Foundation educational booklet *Your Diet & Psoriasis*.

Oats

Many skin-care products, available at most drugstores, contain oat extract or oat derivatives. Oat extracts have been used for centuries as soothing topical agents. Oat plant derivatives have been used to manage dry, itchy skin conditions. Many bath products include colloidal oatmeal as the active ingredient.

You can make your own oatmeal bath. Combine one cup oats, one quarter cup dried milk and two tablespoons apricot kernel oil. Pulverize the oats and dry milk in a food processor or blender. Gradually mix in the oil. Place the mixture in a cotton bag, sock or handkerchief and put in the tub while filling. To release the preparation, squeeze while soaking in the bath.

Tea tree oil

A species of tea tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*) produces tea tree oil. This tea tree is native to Australia, and its oil was first used in surgery and dentistry in the 1920s. It is known for its antibacterial and antiseptic properties. Tea tree oil has traditionally been used for colds, headaches, toothaches, sore muscles, rheumatism and skin disorders.

Today, tea tree oil is the active ingredient in a variety of creams, lotions, soaps and shampoos. Some Foundation members report success with it, particularly for scalp psoriasis.

Little is known about what strength of tea tree oil is safe and effective. However, if it irritates the skin, discontinue use. Tea tree oil is toxic if ingested and should only be used topically. Cases of contact allergy have been reported.

PSORIATIC ARTHRITIS

The following treatments are complementary and alternative substances or techniques reported to be beneficial for people with psoriatic arthritis.

Glucosamine and chondroitin

Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate supplements are used to slow the progression and reduce the pain of osteoarthritis (the deterioration of cartilage between joint bones). Both glucosamine and chondroitin occur naturally in the body. Glucosamine is thought to promote the formation and repair of cartilage. Chondroitin is believed to promote water retention and elasticity in cartilage and inhibit enzymes that break down cartilage. Over-the-counter glucosamine and chondroitin supplements contain these substances extracted from animal tissue.

The National Institutes of Health conducted the first multicenter clinical trial in the United States to test the effects of glucosamine and chondroitin for the treatment of knee osteoarthritis. The Glucosamine/Chondroitin Arthritis Intervention Trial (GAIT) tested whether glucosamine and chondroitin used separately or in combination are effective in reducing

pain and improving functional ability in patients with knee osteoarthritis. Researchers found that for a subset of study participants with moderate-to-severe pain, glucosamine combined with chondroitin sulfate provided statistically significant pain relief compared to placebo. For participants in the mild pain subset, glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate together or alone did not provide statistically significant pain relief.

Very few side effects have been reported for these supplements, and the long-term safety is fairly well established. They should not be taken by women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, or by children.

Glucosamine has been shown to increase blood sugar levels in diabetics. If you have diabetes, consult a doctor before taking glucosamine.

Methylsulfonylmethane (MSM)

MSM, or methylsulfonylmethane, is a natural chemical found in plants, fruits, vegetables and grains, but it is destroyed when food is processed by the body. It is a natural sulfur compound, and sulfur is needed by the body to maintain healthy connective tissue and joint function. MSM is also said to relieve pain and have anti-inflammatory properties. No one knows how it works or why it seems to relieve pain in some people.

MSM is available at health food stores as a dietary supplement. There is very little scientific data on the benefits, side effects or safety of MSM. The long-term effects are unknown. MSM should not be taken by individuals with sulfa allergies.

S-adenosylmethionine (SAM-e)

SAM-e is a stabilized, synthetic form of a chemical produced naturally in all animals. It helps the body make and regulate hormones, cell membranes and neurotransmitters that affect mood. It also contributes to the building blocks for cartilage and is involved in making glutathione, which the liver uses to remove toxins such as alcohol.

While SAM-e can be bought over the counter, the long-term effects have not been adequately studied nor has the right dose been established. It is recommended that use of the supplement be first discussed with your doctor.

Magnet therapy

Therapeutic magnets for relieving pain have become more popular in recent years. While there are several theories as to why magnets might be effective, no one is absolutely sure how they work. Dozens of companies market magnets in the form of coin-size patches; bandage-like adhesive strips; magnets tucked into splints, braces or wraps; facial masks; car seats; shoe insoles; sleeping pads; and mattresses.

Unpleasant side effects reported with magnet use include headache, insomnia and body pain. Pregnant women should not use magnets because of the unknown risk to the unborn fetus. People with pacemakers should not use magnets because of the possibility of triggering a cardiac arrest.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Association of Naturopathic Physicians
866.538.2267 www.naturopathic.org

American Association of Oriental Medicine
866.455.7999 www.aaom.org

American Botanical Council
512.926.4900 www.herbalgram.org

American Emu Association
541.332.0675 www.aea.emu.org

American Massage Therapy Association
847.864.0123 www.amtamassage.org

Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals
800.458.2267 www.abmp.com

ConsumerLab
914.722.9149 www.consumerlab.com

Federation of Chiropractic Licensing Boards
970.356.3500 www.fclb.org

Herb Research Foundation
303.449.2265 www.herbs.org

Institute for Traditional Medicine
503.233.4907 www.itmonline.org

National Center for Complementary and Alternative
Medicine
888.644.6226 nccam.nih.gov

National Center for Homeopathy
877.624.0613 www.homeopathic.org

National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage
and Bodywork
800.296.0664 www.ncbtmb.com

National Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental
Medicine
703.548.9004 www.nccaom.org

National Institute of Ayurvedic Medicine
845.278.8700 www.niam.com

U.S. Department of Agriculture/National Agricultural
Library, Food and Nutrition Information Center
301.504.5719 www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

U.S. Food and Drug Administration
888.INFO.FDA (888.463.6332) www.fda.gov

U.S. Pharmacopeia
800.227.8772 www.usp.org

STAY INFORMED AND INVOLVED. TAKE ACTION.

The National Psoriasis Foundation is committed to improving the lives of people with psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. Join the Psoriasis Foundation to make a difference in the lives of millions of people with these diseases. Donate today!

Call **800.723.9166**

Visit **www.psoriasis.org**

E-mail **getinfo@psoriasis.org**

The following educational materials are available from the National Psoriasis Foundation:

- Alternative Approaches
- Biologic Medications for Psoriasis & Psoriatic Arthritis
- Conception, Pregnancy & Psoriasis
- Genital Psoriasis
- Phototherapy: Light Treatment for Psoriasis
- Psoriasis: How It Makes You Feel
- Psoriasis on Specific Skin Sites
- Psoriatic Arthritis
- Scalp Psoriasis
- Specific Forms of Psoriasis
- Steroids
- Sun & Water Therapy
- Systemic Medications: Internal Drugs for Moderate to Severe Psoriasis
- Topical Treatments for Psoriasis
- You & Your Doctor: Things to Consider
- Your Diet & Psoriasis

More updated information may be available at
www.psoriasis.org

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MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to improve the quality of life of people who have psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. Through education and advocacy, we promote awareness and understanding, ensure access to treatment, and support research that will lead to effective management and, ultimately, a cure.

The National Psoriasis Foundation, a charitable 501(c)(3) organization, depends on your tax-deductible donations to support the millions of people diagnosed with psoriasis and/or psoriatic arthritis. The Psoriasis Foundation is governed by a volunteer Board of Trustees and is advised on medical issues by a volunteer Medical Board. For more information, or to obtain a copy of the Foundation's Annual Report, call 800.723.9166.

National Psoriasis Foundation educational materials are reviewed by members of our Medical Board and are not intended to replace the counsel of a physician. The Psoriasis Foundation does not endorse any medications, products or treatments for psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis and advises you to consult a physician before initiating any treatment.

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