
Homeopathy

*H*omeopathy is one of the more controversial forms of CAM. Much of the controversy is due to the fact that the basic principles of homeopathy are in conflict with many of the fundamental concepts of conventional medicine as well as those of chemistry and physics. In spite of these controversial ideas, homeopathy is, on a worldwide basis, one of the most popular forms of CAM.

Homeopathy is a system of medicine that was developed in the 1800s by Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician. Homeopathy was very popular in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. The use of homeopathy in the United States declined from the 1950s to the 1970s, but its popularity has rebounded since then.

Homeopathy is used globally. On a worldwide basis, \$1 to 5 billion are spent yearly on this form of treatment. Homeopathy is most popular in Europe and India. Homeopathic remedies are dispensed in pharmacies in France, and 25 percent of German physicians use homeopathy in their clinical practice. In the United States, \$227 million are spent on homeopathy on an annual basis. Homeopathy is growing by approximately 12 percent yearly in the United States, and approximately 1 percent of American adults currently use homeopathy.

Treatment Method

Homeopathy is based on several principles. One is the “law of similars,” which states that “like cures like.” Variations of this principle have been used in other forms of medicine for thousands of years. In homeopathy, it is believed that, if large doses of a substance produce specific symptoms, very small doses of that substance will cure the same symptoms. For example, because large doses of arsenic produce stomach cramps, very low doses of arsenic may be used to treat them.

The use of very low doses of substances is another important principle of homeopathy. Natural substances, such as herbs, minerals, or animal products, are mixed with water or alcohol and then diluted 1:10 or 1:100. These dilutions are then repeated many times such that the final solution is *extremely dilute*. In homeopathic notation, “X” is used for 1:10 dilutions, “C” is used for 1:100 dilutions, and a number is used for the number of times a specific dilution is made. For example, “12X” refers to a solution that has been diluted 12 times in a 1:10 manner, and “30C” signifies a 1:100 dilution performed 30 times.

Many homeopathic preparations are so dilute that they do not contain even a single molecule of the original substance. In this situation, it is argued that the water has a “memory” for the substance that it once contained. Also, by the laws of homeopathy, it is believed that a solution is *more* potent if it contains *less* of a substance. These ideas of water “memory” and increased potency with increased dilution, which defy the conventional laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, generate much of the controversy about homeopathy. The use of these dilute solutions has raised questions about whether homeopathy is simply a way to produce a placebo response.

Homeopathy is focused on identifying symptoms and the personal features of the individual. In addition, homeopathic treatment aims to use the body’s natural healing processes. This is in contrast to conventional medicine in which symptoms are used primarily to diagnose an underlying disease; the personal characteristics of an individual are not a critical component of the diagnostic process or choice of therapy; and treatment involves the use of drugs and other therapies that improve the disease process but do not necessarily alter the body’s natural healing abilities.

Because of the detailed evaluation process, homeopaths probably become more familiar with their patients and spend more time with them than do physicians who practice conventional medicine. One study found that physicians in the United States who practice homeopathy spend more than twice as much time with their patients than physicians who do not practice homeopathy. The in-depth relationship that develops in homeopathy may be important for the healing process and may certainly augment any type of placebo effect.

A variety of homeopathic remedies have been suggested for MS. The treatment regimen depends on the individual and the specific symptoms. Homeopathic remedies that are sometimes recommended for MS include *Argentum nitricum*, *Aurum muriaticum*, and *Plumbum metallicum*.

Could Homeopathy Be a Placebo Effect?

Because the approach of a homeopath may be conducive to a placebo effect and homeopathic remedies may not actually contain any active substance,

much of the beneficial effect of homeopathy may be a placebo response. Even if it is a placebo response, it may be helpful in certain situations. It is known that placebos are generally 30 to 40 percent effective. For situations in which conventional medicine has no particularly effective therapy, homeopathy may be a way to provide at least a placebo response. Jeremy Swayne, an English homeopath, writes: “If homeopathy is placebo, it presents us with a rich and systematic study of the working of the placebo response, which fully deserves to be taken seriously and investigated. If it is not, then the implications are even more startling” (1).

Different Homeopathic Approaches

There are classic and nonclassic approaches in homeopathy. The classic approach involves a detailed evaluation by a practitioner who develops a personalized treatment plan on the basis of the clinical evaluation. In contrast, the nonclassic approach does not involve a homeopath. Instead, a certain condition is identified, and treatment for that condition is then given. In the nonclassic approach, the condition may be identified by the affected individual or by a nonhomeopath practitioner who uses homeopathic therapy.

Studies in MS and Other Conditions

Whether homeopathic therapy produces effects that are greater than those produced by placebos is subject to controversy. Many clinical studies have evaluated homeopathic treatment for a variety of conditions. Unfortunately, many of these studies have been poorly conducted, and the results are often not conclusive.

To attempt to clarify this area, two recent studies have evaluated the results of multiple homeopathic studies. In 1991, a report examined 107 homeopathic studies published between 1966 and 1990 (2). Most of the studies were of low quality. However, approximately three-fourths of them reported beneficial effects. A research article in 1997 analyzed the results of 89 homeopathic studies (3). This study concluded that no studies have clearly proven homeopathy to be an effective therapy for any specific condition. However, it was also argued in this study that the effects of homeopathy are not simply placebo effects. These studies indicate that future studies are necessary to determine the effectiveness of homeopathy.

Homeopathy is not one of the most commonly used forms of CAM among people with MS in the United States. In contrast, homeopathy is used frequently by people with MS in Europe. Recent studies have shown

that among people with MS, homeopathy is the most popular form of CAM in Holland and one of the most popular CAM therapies in Germany.

Specific homeopathic remedies are sometimes recommended for MS. The medical literature contains isolated reports (anecdotes) of individuals with MS treated with homeopathy. However, there are no well-documented large studies of the effect of homeopathic treatment on MS.

The effects of homeopathy on other diseases have been investigated. Preliminary results indicate that homeopathy may improve symptoms in people with rheumatoid arthritis, which, like MS, is an autoimmune disorder. Homeopathy has produced mixed results for neurologic diseases other than MS. One low-quality study found that homeopathy was effective for anxiety and depression. Two studies in stroke found no benefit, while one preliminary study in people with mild head injury reported some positive effects. A beneficial response was found in one study of people with migraine headaches.

Viral infections, such as the common cold and flu, may lead to MS attacks. As a result, it may be helpful for people with MS to try to prevent viral infections or to shorten the time that they are affected by a viral infection. There are limited options for the treatment or prevention of viral infections, which include simple preventive measures (such as hand-washing and avoiding exposure to infected people), the flu vaccination, and recently developed prescription medications that decrease the duration and severity of the flu. Supplements of unproven effectiveness for the common cold (echinacea, garlic, zinc, vitamin C) pose a theoretical risk for people with MS because of possible immune-stimulating activity.

Given the limited options, some people consider the use of homeopathy for preventing or treating viral infections. Studies of homeopathic therapies for viral syndromes have produced mixed results. For people with an interest in homeopathic remedies, this approach may be a reasonable possibility for viral infections. If homeopathy is used, available conventional therapies should be discussed with a physician, and it must be kept in mind that the homeopathic therapies are not proven to be effective.

Side Effects

Overall, homeopathy is very well tolerated. Homeopathy should not be used in lieu of conventional medical therapy. Some of the substances used in homeopathy, such as snake venom, arsenic, and poison oak, are potentially toxic. However, the doses of these substances are generally so low that they do not cause problems.

Homeopaths note several precautions that should be taken. One is that treatment should stop when a symptom resolves. Otherwise, the treatment may produce recurrence of the symptom. Also, there are “antidotes” that may interfere with treatment. Antidotes include coffee, acupuncture, x-rays, and dental drilling. Finally, a person receiving homeopathic treatment should notify the homeopath of any conventional medical treatment that is being used because this information may affect the homeopathic interpretation of symptoms.

Practical Information

In choosing a homeopath, it is best to choose a practitioner who has graduated from a program accredited by the Council on Homeopathic Education. The five accredited programs are:

- Bastyr University, Seattle, Washington
- Hahnemann Medical Clinic, Albany, California
- International Foundation for Homeopathy, Seattle, Washington
- National College of Natural Health Sciences, Seattle, Washington
- Ontario College of Naturopathic Medicine, Toronto, Ontario

More information on homeopathy can be obtained from the National Center for Homeopathy (NCH) ([http:// www.healthy.net/uch/nchsearch.htm](http://www.healthy.net/uch/nchsearch.htm)); 801 North Fairfax Street, Suite 306, Alexandria, Virginia 22314 (703-548-7790).

Conclusion

Homeopathy is a low-risk, low–moderate cost therapy with unproven effectiveness. No rigorous studies have specifically evaluated the effect of homeopathy on MS. For people with MS who are interested in this approach, it may be worth considering for mild conditions (such as viral infections and low levels of pain or anxiety) or for conditions for which conventional medical therapy is ineffective or only partially effective. Homeopathy should not be used in place of conventional medicine. Specifically, homeopathic treatment should not be used for controlling MS disease activity in place of conventional medications such as Copaxone[®], Avonex[®], Betaseron[®], and Rebif[®].

Additional Readings

Books

Swayne J. *Homeopathic Method: Implications for Clinical Practice and Medical Science*. New York: Churchill Livingstone, 1998.

Journal Articles

Linde K, Clausius N, Ramirez G, et al. Are the clinical effects of homoeopathy placebo effects? A meta-analysis of placebo-controlled trials. *Lancet* 1997; 350:834–843.

Kleijnen J, Knipschild P, ter Riet G. Clinical trials of homoeopathy. *Br Med J* 1991; 302:316–326.