

and charge between about £25 and £75 for the initial consultation, less for follow-up sessions. There are, however, some doctors and a few other health professionals (such as nurses, pharmacists and midwives) who practise in the NHS. There are also five homeopathic hospitals within the NHS.

### Further information

#### Homeopathic Trust and Faculty of Homeopathy

☎ 020 7566 7800  
www.trusthomeopathy.org

#### Society of Homeopaths

☎ 01604 621400  
www.homeopathy-soh.org.uk

# Homeopathy

Homeopathy is a complementary therapy that treats illnesses with very dilute preparations, called remedies, made from plant, mineral, metal and insect sources. It's not known scientifically how homeopathy works, and there is not a conclusive body of evidence that it does. But homeopaths believe that the remedies stimulate the bodies' own healing powers, which they call the 'vital force'.

### What is homeopathy

The word homeopathy is a combination of two Greek words - 'homeo', which means similar, and 'pathos', which means suffering. A traditional spelling - homoeopathy - is often simplified to homeopathy.

Homeopathy is based on the principle that 'like cures like', meaning that in order to treat a given disorder, a remedy is used that would produce the same symptoms in a healthy person. For example, the poisonous plant deadly nightshade, also known as Belladonna, causes a throbbing headache, high temperature and bright red face. So, the homeopathic remedy Belladonna is given to people who are feverish and have a sudden throbbing headache. Homeopathy was developed

in the 18th century by Dr Samuel Hahnemann after he discovered that small amounts of cinchona bark, the treatment for malaria, caused malaria-like fevers when he took it while healthy. Hahnemann was disillusioned with the medical treatments used at the time such as the use of the poisons arsenic and mercury, and painful but unproven procedures such as bloodletting and purging. He went on to test other substances on himself and healthy friends, recording the sort of symptoms they caused and, so he believed, could therefore cure.

Next, Hahnemann developed a way of making very dilute preparations from these substances. First, a 'mother tincture' of a substance was made by soaking it in alcohol for several

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weeks and straining off the resulting liquid. Then he used some of this mother tincture to make the final remedy by diluting and vigorously shaking (succussing) it in water over and over again. The same basic process is still used to make homeopathic remedies.

The resulting remedy often doesn't contain even one molecule of the original substance, and orthodox science suggests that this would render the remedy inactive. But homeopaths claim that diluting and succussing a remedy in this way actually makes it more effective, as if the vigorous shaking transfers energy into the water and imprints a memory of the starting material onto it. Homeopaths call this potentiation and the remedies can come in different potencies depending on the number of times they are diluted. Common potencies, in order of increasing dilution are 6c, 12c, 30c and 200c. The remedies based on the least amount of dilution - known as lower potencies have less powerful and shorter lasting effects.

As well as tinctures, homeopathic remedies are available as sugar-based tablets, pills, granules and powders to be taken by mouth, and some also come as creams or ointments to be applied directly to the skin.

### **What it's used for**

Most homeopaths claim that homeopathy doesn't just treat the

symptoms of a disease but is holistic, taking into account the person's mind, body and spirit. Because of this, homeopaths treat almost any disorder except for mechanical problems such as damaged joints or severe physical injury. Serious acute or life-threatening events such as a heart attack, stroke, diabetic coma, epileptic seizure or asthma attack should not be treated with homeopathy.

People consult homeopaths for many chronic conditions such as arthritis, eczema, migraine, digestive disorders, period problems, menopausal symptoms, and allergies, as well as emotional problems like depression and anxiety. Many people also self-treat minor ailments like colds and headaches with low-potency homeopathic remedies bought from a pharmacy or health food shop.

### **Does it work?**

While some scientific studies of homeopathy suggest that it is more than twice as effective as placebo (dummy treatment), many doctors are highly sceptical about the claims made for it. Sceptics argue that any effectiveness is due to the therapeutic value of a lengthy consultation and the placebo effect of the remedy - the expectation by the patient and professional that a treatment, even one that has no active ingredient, is effective.

More research is needed before it

is possible to say which conditions homeopathic remedies can definitely help.

### **What happens at a consultation?**

An initial consultation with a homeopath generally takes 1-2 hours, during which you will be asked detailed questions about your general health, lifestyle, emotional state, medical and family history, and likes and dislikes. Further consultations are shorter than the first, as the homeopath will already have your background information.

### **Homeopathic practice**

Many homeopaths practice what is called classical homeopathy, which claims to identify the ideal remedy for a person's individual make-up or constitution. In classical homeopathy, diseases aren't diagnosed in the same way as in conventional medicine. In fact, the remedy chosen is also the diagnosis. Other homeopaths practice 'complex homeopathy' and prescribe a combination of remedies, rather than just one. Lastly, there are homeopaths who prescribe on the basis of a conventional medical diagnosis or according to symptoms only. These also tend to be conventionally trained doctors.

### **Taking homeopathic remedies**

Homeopathic remedies should be taken at least 30 minutes after a meal and no food or drink should be consumed for

at least 10 minutes afterwards. Some homeopaths warn against using any strong tasting or smelling substances like toothpaste, peppermint, alcohol, spicy foods or essential oils because they believe these to cancel out the effects of a remedy. For acute conditions, only one dose of a remedy may be needed, while chronic conditions may need to be treated for many months, involving several consultations and multiple different remedies.

### **Side effects and risks?**

In general, homeopathy appears to be safe, probably because the active ingredients of homeopathic remedies are present in such low concentrations. However, some homeopaths report that after a remedy has been taken symptoms sometimes get worse for a short period of time before getting better. This is known as a 'healing' reaction and is said to be a necessary part of the healing process.

### **Finding a qualified practitioner**

Unlike medicine, nursing and osteopathy, there is no statutory regulation of homeopaths. This limits the control and legal redress available to patients and explains why most medical insurers will not cover homeopathic treatment except when given by a qualified doctor.

Most homeopaths work privately