

Red Alert

Health

Natural Cures That Really Work

Skeptical about New Age medicine? For many common ills, scientific studies show that alternative methods may make you feel better, sooner, than traditional cures.

BY PAMELA WEINTRAUB

Whether or not you've actually *tried* acupuncture, hypnosis, or other popular alternative remedies, it's tough to ignore that they're out there. Bookstores devote entire sections to New Age healing. Television reporters tout the latest findings on non-Western cures. And most of us know someone who has turned to unconventional therapies—either in search of a more “natural” way to heal or when traditional treatments didn't work. In fact, according to a Harvard study, a third of Americans are using some form of alternative medical care, spending an estimated \$13.7 billion a year on such remedies.

But can they really make us well? Often, yes. Though many healing methods don't

live up to their claims or are untested, several have earned the respect of mainstream doctors. “As a physician,” says Adriane Fugh-Berman, M.D., a medical officer at the National Institutes of Health and author of *Alternative Medicine: What Works*, “I've seen scientific evidence of these therapies in the form of clinical trials.” And that's what you'll find here—seven natural cures you can trust.


Chiropractic care for back pain. A landmark 1994 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services revealed that spinal manipulation was not only effective at relieving acute lower back pain, but it also worked better than surgery, drug therapy, and other conventional treatments.

INSURANCE COMPANIES GO NATURAL

Say you develop an ear infection. Your doctor is likely to prescribe a potent, maybe expensive, antibiotic. Your insurance company, in turn, will probably cover the cost of the doctor visit and, perhaps, the medication. But imagine if, instead of the antibiotic, your doctor—not an M.D., but rather, a naturopath—prescribed a treatment course of warm garlic oil, vitamin C, and echinacea. Would your care be covered?

It could very well be—if your insurance provider is among the increasing number that pay for alternative treatments. The first company to pioneer such a medical plan was American Western Life Insurance. When Western Life started its program in 1992, few clients joined; the number is now up to 25 percent.

Other companies aren't far (continued on page 56)



Alternative medicine goes mainstream with massage, acupuncture, and echinacea.

Additional evidence comes from a three-year study published in the *British Medical Journal* last year that tracked 741 people with debilitating lower back pain. Patients were randomly assigned to either an M.D. or a chiropractor; those treated by chiropractors were significantly more likely to feel better and return to their normal lives. **What you need to know:** Be wary of practitioners who suggest you see them on a regular basis for life or who prescribe homeopathic remedies. And check out your chiropractor's credentials: The Council on Chiropractic Education (602-443-8877) can tell you whether your practitioner's school is on its list.

Acupuncture for nausea, including morning sickness. The ancient Chinese practice of acupuncture rests on the premise that needles inserted into the skin can affect the body's “energy flow,” thereby restoring our natural balance and promoting health. (continued on page 56)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: MICHAEL MELFORD/IMAGE BANK. JEREMY SHATAN. DAVID PERRY/PHOTONICA.

Cures

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Variations of the technique often use pressure or electrical stimulation in place of needles.

Several studies document the success of acupuncture, acupressure, and electrical stimulation in treating nausea, but some of the best research comes from the late J.W. Dundee, M.D., Ph.D., of Queens University in Belfast. His 1991 study found that 75 out of 100 chemotherapy patients who received electrical stimulation along an acupuncture point felt relief from nausea. And in an earlier study Dr. Dundee found that acupressure was successful in reducing the severity and frequency of morning sickness.

What you need to know: If you're pregnant, it's probably wisest to try the less invasive acupressure or electrical stimulation. For a list of certified practitioners in your state, send \$3 to the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists, P.O. Box 97075, Washington, D.C. 20090, or call 202-232-1404.

Biofeedback for migraines. Anyone who suffers from migraines knows just how debilitating they can be. But painkillers and other drugs aren't the only remedy. In a 1995 study of migraine patients at Texas Tech University, those who received biofeedback-assisted relaxation therapy experienced significantly reduced pain compared to those who simply relaxed on their own.

What you need to know: For treatment, contact a headache or pain clinic or one of the hundreds of groups nationwide now specializing in biofeedback. Or ask your doctor for a referral.

Echinacea for colds and flu. The U.S. medical establishment has yet to embrace this herbal remedy, but research from abroad provides compelling evidence that it's effective. In a 1992 German study, 180 patients were divided at random into three groups: One received a placebo; the other two, an echinacea extract (at different doses). Those treated with the correct dose of echinacea had less severe symptoms—and they recovered faster. Echinacea's effectiveness was also demonstrated in a 1989 research review conducted by Germany's Federal Health Agency, which found that the herb boosted the immune system.

What you need to know: Take echinacea for no longer than eight weeks. Also, some people may be allergic to the herb.

Massage therapy for infant health. A 1996 study conducted by Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institute at the Miami School of Medicine, showed that infants who were massaged established more regular sleep patterns and gained more weight than a control group of babies who were rocked instead. Massage may be particularly helpful for preemies: In a 1986 study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, Dr. Field reported that premature babies who were massaged for 15 minutes three times a day gained 47 percent more weight than those who weren't massaged.

What you need to know: To put these findings into practice at home, Dr. Field suggests 15-minute massages to the back and front of the baby's body right before nap time. The most effective technique resembles Swedish massage—stroking, with application of gentle pressure.

Progressive relaxation for post-surgical pain. Anyone anticipating surgery, whether

it's the removal of a cyst, a cesarean, or disk repair, may want to learn this technique in which you relax each part of your body, from your toes to your head. Studies of progressive relaxation were conducted largely during the 1980s, the most notable directed by Frank Lawlis, Ph.D., and published in the journal *Spine* in 1985. Dr. Lawlis found that 50 back patients who learned the technique prior to spinal surgery required far less medication and were back on their feet much more quickly than those who hadn't. Other studies have found that patients who had undergone abdominal and open-heart surgery experienced similar relief.

What you need to know: Instruction in progressive relaxation is widely available. Check your local hospital or contact your state's

(continued from page 54) behind. Mutual of Omaha covers the Reversal Program, which relies on a low-fat diet, meditation, group counseling, and exercise to reverse severe heart disease. Prudential HealthCare covers acupuncture for chronic pain. And Blue Cross of Washington and Alaska is launching AlternaPath, a plan that covers both conventional and alternative treatments, including access to acupuncturists, naturopaths, massage therapists, and nutritionists.

Even insurance companies without special programs are funding therapies they wouldn't have in the past. Two states, Washington and Nevada, now require that health insurers cover acupuncture, and 41 states mandate that if an insurance policy covers conditions a chiropractor is licensed to treat, patients must be given the option to see a chiropractor.

local branch of the American Psychological Association for a referral (800-964-2000).

Hypnosis for pain relief (and menstrual cramps). A series of studies have shown hypnosis to be effective against many types of pain, including pain associated with headaches, cancer, and childbirth. One 1992 study published in the journal *Pain* found that hypnosis was effective in controlling pain and nausea in patients who underwent bone marrow transplants.

Hypnosis may also help relieve menstrual cramps, says Jean Holroyd, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA. "Hypnosis can alleviate menstrual pain by helping women relax," she explains. "Some who are highly hypnotizable can also use it to 'turn off' their pain."

What you need to know: Ask your doctor for a referral to an accredited hypnotherapist; this specialist should coordinate the therapy with physicians working to treat the underlying problems causing your pain.

There are, of course, many promising alternative therapies not yet validated by research. For instance, while anecdotal evidence abounds that hypnosis helps smokers to quit and obese patients to control their appetites, rigorous studies have yet to be done.

But other research is under way. According to the National Institutes of Health, a new spate of studies are looking at hypnosis for lower back pain and fracture healing, guided imagery and relaxation for boosting the immune system, biofeedback for diabetes, yoga for obsessive-compulsive disorder, and acupuncture for attention deficit disorder. □

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