

# Stroke and the Family

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A NEW GUIDE

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## Nontraditional Treatments

Marybeth is a sixty-nine-year-old yoga instructor who develops atrial fibrillation and a resulting stroke. Her physician prescribes Coumadin (warfarin) for prevention of another stroke. Despite an extensive program of rehabilitation, she has persistent weakness of her arm and needs a cane to walk. She is interested in trying a natural herbal supplement her friend has recommended, as well as acupuncture treatment. She is hesitant to discuss these treatments with her physician, however, for fear that he will be uninterested, disapprove, or even ridicule them. Her sister, who is a nurse, strongly encourages her to discuss these options with her physician, and Marybeth reluctantly does so. Contrary to her expectations, her physician is supportive and open to her use of nontraditional treatments, as long as they are safe and do not interfere with her medical therapies. Marybeth's physician expresses support for a trial of acupuncture, but advises against the use of the herbal supplement out of concern that it may interfere with Coumadin metabolism. Marybeth undergoes acupuncture and feels that her energy level is improved. She decides not to use the herbal supplement because of her physician's concerns. Are nontraditional treatments safe after a stroke? Do they help? Which ones are best for stroke survivors?

Stroke recovery is often incomplete, despite extensive rehabilitation. While medical science continues to progress, there are many areas, such as stroke recovery, where it doesn't yet offer cures. As a result, people who have had a stroke and their families are often interested in exploring "nontraditional" treatments, sometimes also referred to as complementary or alternative medicine. Although most of these treatments are, by definition, not proven and not widely accepted by the medical profession

at large, they may be a reasonable option for someone who wants to seek treatment alternatives. Often, consumers adopt the attitude, “it couldn’t hurt, and maybe it will help,” a reasonable approach when faced with a condition for which conventional medicine does not offer a cure. Some individuals also have personal or philosophical preferences for natural or other nontraditional treatments.

Because alternative treatments encompass a very broad range of options, from meditation to acupuncture to energy healing, it is important that each treatment be evaluated individually. Advertisements for amazing cures for almost every problem, including stroke, are easily found in the checkout aisle of any grocery store. Some of these treatments, such as acupuncture for pain management, are widely accepted and well studied. Others, such as crystal therapy, may be benign but ineffective. Still others, such as certain herbal treatments, may actually be dangerous in some cases. Here are some general rules of thumb when considering nontraditional treatments:

- Know the risks, reported benefits, and costs.
- Don’t use nontraditional treatments as a replacement for important medical treatments (such as medications to prevent a second stroke).
- Make certain your physician is aware of all nontraditional treatments you are considering, and verify that they will not interfere or interact with conventional medical treatments.
- Avoid treatments with unrealistic or impossible claims (“cures stroke,” and so on).

## Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a long-established treatment that originated in China and has become popular as a treatment around the world. Although most acupuncture treatments share similar techniques such as insertion of fine needles and the use of electric stimulation through needles (electroacupuncture), there are actually many different approaches and nuances that have been developed in different regions. Many acupuncturists also offer related treatments, such as acupressure, moxabustion,

low-intensity laser acupuncture, and traditional Chinese herbal remedies. Most individuals in the United States receive acupuncture from nonphysician acupuncturists, though some physicians are also trained in this technique. Acupuncture has been best studied for pain treatment and appears to be effective in certain types of pain conditions. It is less well studied, though widely used, for promoting recovery after stroke. The scientific studies of acupuncture post-stroke have had mixed results, with some suggesting that it may be effective in stimulating recovery, and others showing no significant effect. No studies have found evidence of harm, and it appears that acupuncture is generally safe after stroke. Acupuncture has also been anecdotally reported to temporarily reduce spasticity after stroke, though this effect has not been carefully studied. Since acupuncture has been found helpful for a variety of painful conditions, it may be particularly useful for stroke-related pain problems, such as shoulder pain or central pain syndromes.

Individuals who take Coumadin (warfarin) should inform their physician and acupuncturist about this treatment, though acupuncture can probably be used if the Coumadin dose is stable and the INR level appropriate. Individuals with pacemakers should avoid electroacupuncture, which may interfere with pacemaker function.

### Herbal Remedies

The contents of nutritional supplements and herbal remedies are not standardized in the same way conventional medications are, adding to the challenges faced by consumers. Potencies of botanical extracts are not standardized and may vary substantially from one brand to another. Because the marketing of these treatments is so varied, it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what treatment is being provided, and what dose is contained in a capsule.

The reality is that some of these supplements are as powerful as prescription medications, and others are no more potent than a Lifesaver candy. As with supplements, many conventional medications have their origins in plant or other natural sources, including medications derived from molds (penicillin), willow tree bark (aspirin), and yew shrubs (the cancer treatment Taxol). These powerful treatments have been well re-

searched and tested, and complementary medications must be approached with the same respect and caution.

From the perspective of the stroke survivor, the major concern of these medications is their potential side effects, which may increase the risk of stroke or interfere with other, prescribed medications. Supplements containing ephedra may elevate blood pressure and should be avoided. Excessive vitamin K in a vitamin supplement can interfere with Coumadin's ability to protect against future stroke. No herbal treatments or nutritional supplements have been proven to help improve stroke recovery or prevent future strokes.

Stroke survivors should treat all supplements and herbal treatments as medicines, and not take any without consulting their physician. Given that many physicians are unfamiliar with these treatments and their brand names, it may be helpful to bring the actual container to a medical appointment before starting the supplement, so that the physician can evaluate its contents.

### Vitamins

Vitamin supplements are on the boundary between nontraditional treatments and conventional medicine. Certain vitamins, such as folate, vitamin B6, and vitamin B12, have recently been proposed to reduce the risk of stroke by lowering homocysteine levels. While this still remains to be proven, some physicians are now advising their patients to take these vitamins while awaiting the results of studies to evaluate their efficacy. Other vitamins (for example, large doses of vitamin C) are sometimes used by individuals but do not have strong support in the scientific literature. Again, vitamin K interferes with the action of Coumadin (warfarin) and should not be used by stroke survivors unless advised by their physicians.

### Hyperbaric Oxygen

Hyperbaric oxygen has been promoted as a treatment for aphasia or weakness after stroke but has not been rigorously tested. Most physicians consider this a speculative treatment for chronic stroke-related im-

pairments. Hyperbaric oxygen is generally well tolerated, though it is not without risks and can be quite expensive. In general, hyperbaric oxygen therapy should be avoided after stroke until further research is conducted.

### Osteopathic/Chiropractic Manipulation

Manipulation of the spine, performed by chiropractors and some osteopathic physicians, is used to treat a number of disorders, most prominently back and neck pain. Unfortunately, cervical spinal manipulation has been found to be a *cause* of a small number of strokes due to damage of the arteries in the neck (arterial dissection). Spinal manipulation should therefore be avoided by anyone with a history of arterial dissection. Since stroke survivors may suffer from back, neck, or other pain, manipulation is sometimes used to treat these unrelated conditions after stroke, and less commonly, to treat problems directly related to a stroke. There is no published research on its use after stroke, and no strong reason to believe that it is particularly helpful or harmful.

### Therapeutic Massage

Massage therapy may be useful for certain types of muscle pain. Some individuals with spasticity (increased muscle tone) after stroke report reduced symptoms after massage, though this effect has not been studied scientifically. Deep-friction massage may cause bruising in people taking blood thinners like Coumadin and should be avoided. Other, more gentle forms of massage therapy should not generally pose any particular risk after stroke. As with any treatment, check with your doctor first.

### Magnets

Magnets are sometimes used as a treatment for pain and other conditions. There is little scientific evidence to support their use generally, but little evidence of risk. Individuals with implanted medical devices such as pacemakers may experience interference from magnets and should avoid their use unless specifically discussed with their physician.