

Complementary and Alternative Medicine for RLS

Many people use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to address chronic symptoms or to improve overall well-being. An estimated 36% of adults in the US engage in some form of CAM. While little research has been conducted on using CAM to manage RLS, therapies that help reduce stress and anxiety may lessen RLS symptoms.

Complementary medicine refers to the use of alternative therapies together with conventional medicine, like using aromatherapy after surgery. *Alternative medicine* refers to the use of unconventional therapies in place of conventional medicine – for example, treating cancer with a special diet instead of chemotherapy or radiation.

CAM includes a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine. CAM is self-defined depending on the belief systems of individuals or cultures. For example, while tai chi might be considered an alternative therapy in the US, it is a conventional practice in China.

Examples of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Alternative medical systems are complete systems that have evolved over time in specific cultures:

- Aboriginal medicine
- African medicine
- Ayurveda
- Central and South American medicine
- Chinese medicine
- Homeopathy
- Middle Eastern medicine
- Native American medicine
- Naturopathy
- Tibetan medicine

Mind-body interventions affect the mind, body, brain and behavior:

- Acupuncture
- Autogenic training
- Biofeedback
- Cognitive-behavioral approaches
- Dance, music and art therapy
- Hypnosis
- Meditation
- Mental healing
- Prayer

Biological-based therapies include herbal medicines, vitamins, minerals and other “natural” products:

- Dietary supplements
- Herbs
- Individual biological therapies such as laetrile, shark cartilage or bee pollen
- Orthomolecular therapy (varying concentrations of chemicals) such as magnesium, melatonin or megadoses of vitamins

Manipulative and body-based methods focus on the structures and systems of the body, including bones and joints, soft tissues, and circulatory and lymphatic systems:

- Chiropractic therapy
- Craniosacral therapy
- Manipulation
- Massage
- Osteopathy
- Reflexology

Energy therapies involve manipulating personal energy fields:

- Qigong
- Reiki
- Therapeutic touch
- Bioelectromagnetic-based therapies such as pulsed fields, magnetic fields, alternating current fields or direct current fields

CAM and RLS

It's important to tell your healthcare provider if you use CAM, whether for RLS or another condition. If the therapy improves your RLS symptoms, your doctor may want to change your treatment strategy, perhaps by adjusting a medication dosage. Some CAM practices may interfere with your other RLS treatment or exacerbate symptoms, and vice versa.

While little research exists on using CAM to treat RLS symptoms, clinical trials have shown promising results in patients who use yoga, mind-body therapies or cognitive behavioral therapy; and to a lesser extent, dietary supplementation such as valerian or magnesium. More extensive research has been conducted on the effectiveness of CAM therapies for improving sleep.



Complementary medicine: alternative therapy along with conventional medicine

Alternative medicine: unconventional therapies in place of conventional medicine



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Therapies for Improving Sleep

Alternative medical systems

- Chinese medicine: Acupuncture and acupressure have been shown to decrease awake time and improve quality of sleep by increasing production of melatonin, a natural hormone in the body that regulates the body clock.
- Auricular acupressure (stimulation on points of the ear) has been demonstrated to improve the ability to fall asleep.
- Yoga, meditation, hypnosis and biofeedback have all been shown to improve sleep, as well as decrease anxiety that can increase RLS symptoms.

Mind-body interventions

- Music therapy: Therapeutic doses of music have been proven to transform brain waves and improve sleep, as well as daytime function.
- Aromatherapy: Several studies have shown that lavender improves sleep and relieves insomnia.

Biological-based therapies

- Valerian has been shown effective in promoting sleep onset, sleep perception and sleep quality when taken before bedtime. It can also be taken during the day to reduce anxiety. It must be used regularly for two to three weeks to have an effect, and the therapeutic dose will vary with the type of preparation (extract, tincture or tea). The quality of the product is very important in maximizing chances for benefit without side effects.
- Herbs such as hops, chamomile, lemon balm, skullcap, Indian pipe and snakeroot are sometimes used to improve sleep, but no research has been done to prove their effectiveness.
- Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain to regulate circadian rhythm, or the body's internal clock. Although RLS follows a circadian pattern, RLS is a sensorimotor disorder of the central nervous system. Melatonin contributes to lower levels of dopamine and may play a role in exacerbating RLS. Another characteristic of melatonin is its serotonergic properties. Serotonin contributes to feelings of well-being and happiness. Increases in serotonin reduce rapid eye movement sleep, the stage of sleep associated with dreaming, and can aggravate periodic leg movements of sleep (PLMS). This is consistent with antidepressant medications called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) that cause a worsening of RLS symptoms. For individuals with RLS, taking melatonin comes with the risk of aggravating symptoms.

- Ramelteon (Rozerem) is a melatonin receptor site medication that helps improve melatonin absorption for falling asleep.
- Nutritional supplements that may improve sleep include the amino acids tryptophan and 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP), and magnesium in people who have low magnesium levels. Please note: Vitamin K is not recommended as it can interfere with blood coagulation for patients on blood thinners such as warfarin (Coumadin).

Manipulative therapies

- Interventions like massage, osteopathy, chiropractic medicine, craniosacral therapy and reflexology have been shown to improve sleep in some patients.

Energy therapies

- Qigong, a traditional Chinese practice of aligning breath, movement and awareness, may improve sleep.
- Reiki, energy healing through hands, is reported to improve sleep, although effects are difficult to measure.
- Therapeutic touch includes directing the flow of energy that helps patients heal themselves.
- Tai chi has shown promising results for improving sleep quality, onset, duration, efficiency and disturbances, and decreasing daytime sleepiness.
- Light therapy uses exposure to bright light to stabilize or shift the body clock to help people get up or go to bed earlier.

- If your physician is dismissive of your RLS symptoms or your desire to explore CAM, you may want to consider going to a different physician. RLS is a serious condition and you have the right to respectful, responsive care as you pursue both CAM and conventional therapies.

To learn more about CAM, visit www.nccih.nih.gov/health.

The RLS Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of the men, women, and children who live with this often devastating disease. Our mission is to increase awareness, improve treatments and, through research, find a cure for restless legs syndrome.

This publication has been reviewed and approved by reviewers from the RLS Foundation Scientific and Medical Advisory Board.

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Exploring CAM: Things to Consider

- The best model for your medical care is integrative, where everyone works together. Let your regular healthcare provider know you are exploring CAM therapies. Also be sure to consult with a CAM practitioner when trying any new therapy. A CAM professional can help ensure your treatment is safe and help you find the amount and duration of therapy that works best for you.
- Interventions like music or aromatherapy are optimal at therapeutic doses. If they are used too often or too intensely, the body can become desensitized.
- CAM therapies typically take weeks or months of use before people experience results; continued treatment is usually required for maintenance.
- No one therapy works for everyone. A therapy that works for you may not work for another person.
- Many CAM interventions are expensive and not covered by health insurance; others, like chiropractic medicine and acupuncture, are usually covered. Some, like prayer and meditation, can be explored at little or no cost.