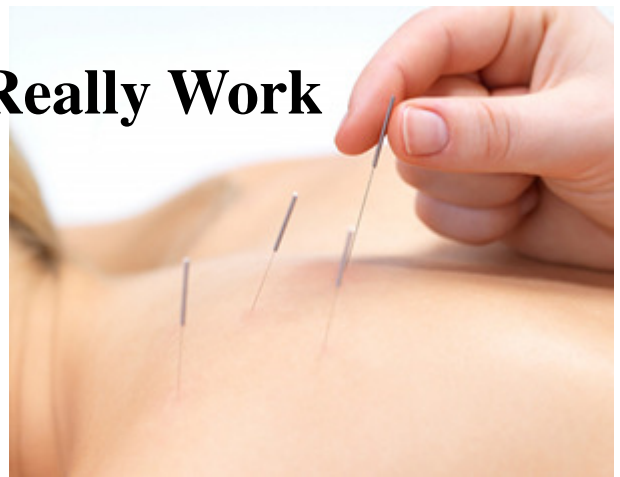


# Alternative Therapies That Really Work



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According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), as many as **62% of Americans use some form of alternative medicine**. But few of these treatments are covered by the average medical-insurance plan. The NIH estimates that Americans spend between \$36 billion and \$47 billion out of pocket each year on alternative therapies such as **acupuncture** or meditation.

So, do they really work? With government funding, science is expanding its study of alternative and complementary treatments. Some, but not all, are showing positive results. And many of the most successful methods involve “mind-body therapies”—techniques that use the power of the mind to help heal the body.

Here are three commonly used mind-body therapies that have scientific backing and have passed the litmus test of rigorous medical inquiry.

## ACUPUNCTURE

**What it is:** Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese practice involving the placement of very skinny, sterile needles into the skin at specific points located along “energy meridians.”

**How it works:** Eastern philosophy says that acupuncture affects the flow of *qi* (pronounced “chee”), or energy, through the energy meridians. Western science reasons that the needles interact with our nervous system, triggering the release of hormone like chemicals that affect our mood, perception of pain, and immune response.

**What it’s good for:** In a 2004 study, acupuncture was shown to be helpful in reducing pain due to knee arthritis. It also could be beneficial for sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder. And when used along with in vitro fertilization, it may be effective in increasing the odds of success in female conception. Stimulating an acupuncture point in the toe even may help correct the breech position of babies in the last trimester and allow more women to avoid C-sections, according to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

## **MEDITATION**

**What it is:** Meditation activates the relaxation response and improves blood pressure and hormone balance. The most popular method is transcendental meditation (TM), in which you focus on repeating a personal mantra as you meditate.

**How it works:** TM trains you to block out distractions, creating calmer and more powerful brain patterns. Brain-wave measurements of experienced practitioners during meditation show slow, focused waves similar to those found during sleep, as well as synchronization of waves from different areas within the brain.

**What it’s good for:** Research indicates that TM may have positive effects on blood pressure, insulin, blood

sugar, and heart health. It also can improve concentration, reduce anxiety, and help with post-traumatic stress. Just say, “Om.”

## **BIOFEEDBACK**

**What it is:** A relatively new technique, biofeedback teaches you to use the power of your brain to control “automatic” functions of the body, such as blood pressure, pulse rate, stress response, skin temperature, and brain waves.

**How it works:** Sensors monitor the automatic function, such as heart rate, which is then displayed on a screen so you can see it. By controlling your thoughts, you learn to change the display in a desired direction.

**What it’s good for:** Studies show that biofeedback can help reduce symptoms in a range of maladies, including high blood pressure, chronic back pain, incontinence, tension headaches, and stress. In experimental research, it even is being used to help paraplegics control artificial limbs with their minds.