
Homeopathy

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Homeopathy is a 200-year-old therapeutic system that uses small doses of various substances to stimulate autoregulatory and self-healing processes. In homeopathy (*homeo* – same; *pathy* – illness), medicines are selected by matching a patient's illness symptoms with symptoms produced by these substances in healthy individuals.

Homeopathic medicines are selected on the total characteristic set of a patient's symptoms, not the "disease label". For example, a patient with a cold whose primary symptoms are stinging and irritation of the eyes and thin, clear nasal discharge, and another person with a cold who has thick, yellow nasal discharge and whose symptoms are alleviated when in fresh air would be prescribed different medicines. Although the diagnosis is the same (upper respiratory tract infection), each receives a different homeopathic medicine based on the symptoms that medicine has produced in well persons (in a "proving"; see below). In cases of long-standing chronic illness it may take several hours to identify the total "characteristic" set of symptoms.

THE HISTORY OF HOMEOPATHY

A German physician, Samuel Christian Hahnemann, discovered the principle of homeopathy at the end of the 18th century. In the course of translating a medical text from English to German, Hahnemann found the explanation offered for why *Cinchona* bark (*China officinalis*) cured malaria was its' bitter taste. Finding this explanation unsatisfactory, he took repeated doses of *Cinchona* to personally determine its effects and found they appeared remarkably similar to the symptoms of malaria. He hypothesized that one may select therapeutic substances on the basis of how closely toxicological symptoms of that substance matched the symptoms of the patient's disease. He called this the "Principle of Similars." He subsequently gave repeated doses of many common remedies to healthy volunteers and meticulously recorded the symptoms they produced. This procedure he called a "proving" (today called "human pathogenic trials"). Hahnemann then attempted to select his treatments for sick patients by matching their symptoms to the symptoms of observed in his provings.

In spite of success using his new medical system, Hahnemann found that during recovery patients were experiencing severe aggravation of their symptoms. He began experimenting with diluted doses of the medicinal substances, and found that healing continued to occur, but aggravations were less. To his surprise, this pattern continued even when the medicinal substances had been diluted beyond the point a material effect could be expected to occur.

SCIENTIFIC SUPPORT FOR THE EFFICACY OF HOMEOPATHIC TREATMENT

Although owing to the individualization of treatment in homeopathy, quality randomized, controlled trials of homeopathic treatment are rare, several independent systematic reviews of homeopathic treatment have been conducted. Of these, three reported that its effects are greater than placebo, and one review found its effects consistent with placebo.

Specific conditions that in which studies have shown homeopathic treatment to be effective include treatment of influenza, allergies, postoperative ileus, and childhood diarrhea, but historically and globally it is used is for a much wider range of health concerns.

SAFETY OF HOMEOPATHIC MEDICINES

The Food and Drug Administration has reviewed few reports of illness associated with homeopathic medicine use and decided that in these cases the medicines were not the likely cause of symptoms. Homeopathic medicines will not interact with conventional medications.

Aggravation of symptoms may occur during homeopathic treatment, usually within a few days of the initial dose, and may take the form of generalized fatigue or a temporary increase in symptom intensity.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN UNDERGOING HOMEOPATHIC TREATMENT

Although in acute illness, a homeopathic medicine is selected based on a few, striking symptoms, in chronic illness the homeopathic interview may take several hours to complete. Discussion will include the objective and subjective aspects, and evolution of each of your present health concerns; previous serious illness; and your personality traits.

Your homeopathic medicine will be prescribed approximately one week after the interview is concluded, the exact potency and dosing schedule determined based on the contents of your interview. A temporary aggravation of symptoms may occur, and generally improvement will occur gently and gradually. Often improvement in mood and attitude is the first sign of improvement. A follow-up appointment is generally scheduled approximately two weeks after the medicine is taken.

In the course of recovery, a temporary return of previously experienced symptoms may arise (e.g., a patient who at one time had a kidney infection in which their lower back had a sensation of coldness may feel this again, although their kidney is not infected).

Often disease symptoms will begin to return after a period. The homeopathic medicine is taken again at this time (i.e., homeopathic medicines are not necessarily used daily, but rather as needed). Over time the symptoms will return less often, until they are completely absent. In long-standing illness this may take years, and require the use of more than one homeopathic medicine.

Homeopathic treatment may be antidoted. Although many substances have been reported to antidote homeopathic medicines (e.g., coffee, exposure to strong odours such as Tiger Balm® or mint toothpastes, etc.), emotional stress and marijuana use are the most common antidotes.

REFERENCES

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