

WELLBEING

The Herbal Truth?

Despite its claim to harness the power of plants, a new study says homeopathy doesn't work. However this is unlikely to dilute the commitment of its A-list advocates

The Queen and the Prince of Wales are both fans and it is available on the NHS. But although homeopathy is used to treat everything from the common cold to malaria and cholera, a recently published study suggests it is no more effective than a placebo.

After analysing research into the impact of homeopathy on 68 health conditions, Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) concluded: "There is no reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective."

The review looked at a number of double blind trials against a placebo, which tested homeopathy as a treatment for health issues including cold and flu, asthma, arthritis, chronic fatigue, sleep disturbance, burns, eczema, cholera and malaria. It found no evidence that the complementary medicine had any significant effect.

"No good-quality, well-designed studies with enough participants for a meaningful result reported either that homeopathy caused greater health improvements than a substance with no effect on the health condition (placebo), or that homeopathy caused health improvements equal to those of another treatment," was how the



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report's authors summarised their findings.

They also dismissed anecdotal evidence and personal accounts of homeopathy. "It is not possible to tell whether a health treatment is effective or not, simply by considering individuals' experiences or healthcare practitioners' beliefs," the report said.

The Australian study is likely to have been welcomed by the British Medical Association, which has called homeopathy "witchcraft", and the Government's chief scientific advisor Sir Mark Walport, who last year branded it "nonsense".

Homeopathy uses herb or plant extracts that, taken in large doses, cause the symptoms of a disease or condition. It then dilutes them to perhaps one part in a million, in a tincture – usually a weak alcohol solution – sort of like an extremely weak vaccination. Practitioners say you do not actually need the active ingredient itself to work, and that its chemical memory is sufficient to effect biological changes.

This not the first time that homeopathy has divided opinion. For centuries, it has been dismissed as rubbish, yet many people still firmly believe in its ethos of treating 'like with like'. It certainly has some powerful advocates.

The royal household has its own court homeopath, while the Queen even treats her animals with it. Back in 2006, Prince Charles told the World Healthcare Assembly that homeopathy was "rooted in ancient traditions that intuitively understood



Prince Charles



Jo Wood



David Beckham

NATURAL BELIEVERS

A-list advocates of homeopathic remedies include Prince Charles, who has long championed alternative medicine, and businesswoman Jo Wood. "The Earth supplies us with everything we need to keep fit, well and healthy," she says. "That is why homeopathy is the right choice for me". Former tennis ace Annabel Croft says she uses "homeopathy to treat everything from early signs of

coughs and colds to sports injuries," while David Beckham gushed about the impressive results of the homeopathic treatment he received after breaking a bone in his foot only weeks before the 2002 World Cup. Other famous homeopathy fans include Hollywood stars Johnny Depp and Catherine Zeta-Jones, sprint king Usain Bolt and rocker Sir Paul McCartney.



Driven to extraction: Homeopathy uses herb or plant extracts that are processed via serial dilution

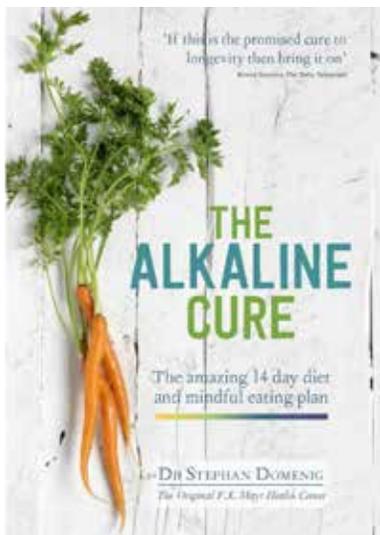
the need to maintain balance and harmony with our minds, bodies and the natural world."

So why do so many people claim it has helped when the science tells us otherwise? The power of the placebo effect should never be underestimated; that is, the ability of the body to heal itself when we believe we are getting an effective treatment, even if that is a sugar pill – or a tincture with the memory of a herbal extract.

And remember that homeopathy is a complementary medicine, not a standalone treatment. As such, it should be accompanied by a visit to your GP, a course of antibiotics or over-the-counter medicines. It is not an alternative – especially if your symptoms continue or get worse. ❏

HEALTH NOTES

👉 The FX factor
Now you can enjoy a taste of life at celebrity favourite detox centre The Original FX Mayr without actually checking in to the Austrian retreat. *The Alkaline Cure 14 Day Diet*, £14.99, has been written by Dr Stephan Domenig, medical director at the famous lakeside clinic.



👉 Well-heeled Elle "The Body" Macpherson has teamed up with Homedics to create her own body of health and beauty gadgets. For happy feet, we love the Heel Smoother, £19.99, from Argos.



👉 Jog on Get the most out of a training run with this high-tech Tom Tom watch that uses GPS technology to track distance covered and the difficulty of a course or terrain and also monitors heart rate. Tom Tom Runner, £249.99, visit tomtom.com.