Understanding Homeopathy as a Healing Option

by Dr. Molly Punzo, MD
Medial Director, Integrative Medicine Department

What is homeopathy?

Samuel Hahnemann, a German chemist, toxicologist, and physician developed homeopathy in the late 18th century. Using himself as a subject, he noted that when he drank Peruvian bark containing quinine (the treatment for malaria), he experienced symptoms of malaria, although he did not have the illness. This caused Hahnemann to experiment further and form his theory that "**like cures like**." One of the basic principles of homeopathy is that when a substance (known to cause certain symptoms in healthy individuals) is given in an extremely diluted and "potentized" form to a person suffering with those same symptoms, it is capable of curing the disease. Some treatments in conventional medicine rely on this "**like-cures-like"** principle: For instance, vaccines introduce small doses of an illness-causing agent to cure or prevent disease.

How does it work?

Homeopathic remedies (the name used for homeopathic medicines) act as catalysts that aid or support the body's inherent healing mechanisms rather than simply suppressing symptoms. Homeopaths have keenly observed that all illnesses have a mental and emotional component to any illness as well as the more obvious physical symptoms. Understanding and taking note of this mental/emotional "state" of the patient is an important and often critical step in selecting the most appropriate remedy or medicine.

What happens during a visit to the homeopath?

An **initial** visit to the homeopath can sometimes take 1-2 hours of time. The homeopathic practitioner interviews the patient at length, asking many questions and observing personality traits as well as unusual or peculiar behavioral or physical characteristics.

What are remedies made from and how are homeopathic remedies prepared?

Homeopathic remedies consist of infinitesimal doses of an herb, mineral, or animal product. They usually come in the form of tiny sugar pills, liquid drops, syrups, or ointments that are diluted to various strengths or potencies. Potencies are labeled by roman numerals. The most common, available in pharmacies and health food stores, are 6, 12, or 30x or C potencies. C potencies contain 1 part of the medicine diluted to 99 parts of water or alcohol; x indicates 1 part of the medicine diluted to 9 parts of the water or alcohol. Other dilutions are available to trained homeopaths. Remedies are usually taken for no more than 2 or 3 days if given for an acute or sudden illness, although some patients require only one or two doses before starting to feel better. If a remedy doesn't work, it is not the most appropriately selected remedy for the set of symptoms. Because of the extremely diluted nature of the homeopathic remedies, homeopathy is quite safe and does not cause the side effects or drug interactions seen with most medications (herbal or conventional).

What illnesses and conditions respond well?

Some of the diseases that respond well to homeopathic treatment include arthritis, migraines, asthma, attention deficit disorder, depression, anxiety, ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, viral illness and influenza, gastritis, irritable bowel syndrome, ear infections, and acute injuries. Actually, homeopathy does not treat a particular disease or illness with any one particular remedy. Rather, one must treat the whole individual including all mental, emotional, and physical complaints. The goal is to find the one most appropriate remedy to treat and cover all the major symptoms the patient is experiencing. This is why homeopathy is seen as one of the more wholistic types of treatments available and the reason patients seem to appreciate and gravitate toward this approach.

Will insurance cover homeopathy?

Insurance companies are more likely to cover homeopathy when the person rendering the service is a health professional, such as an M.D. or Osteopath who also practices homeopathy.

Do you need a prescription and are homeopathic remedies expensive?

No. Homeopathic remedies are inexpensive and can be purchased over the counter. They are prepared by FDA approved pharmacies throughout the United States. A vial that would last about a month costs about $6. The higher potencies are more expensive ($15-$20) and may be purchased through the office of a homeopathic practitioner.

For more information on this topic and other complementary therapies, please call Integrative Medicine at 545-4444, visit our website at www.harthosp.org/IntMed or via email at *itherapies@harthosp.org*

(As part of an ongoing series, the Department of Integrative Medicine will continue to provide education about various complementary therapies and Integrative Medicine program updates)