

Osteopathy is a primary healthcare system, complementary to other medical practices. It is suitable for people of all ages and can contribute to alleviating an enormous range of conditions. Osteopathy recognises that much of the pain and disability we suffer stems from abnormalities in our body's structure and function and osteopaths diagnose and treat over 6 million people a year for problems with muscles, ligaments, nerves and joints to help the body's natural healing ability. Typical problems that can benefit from osteopathic healthcare include neck & back pain, sciatica, sports injuries, repetitive strain injuries (RSI), degenerative conditions such as arthritis, joint and muscular pain, respiratory problems such as asthma, aches & pains associated with pregnancy, headaches & sinusitis, tinnitus & jaw problems. Treatment involves gentle, manual techniques to ease pain, reduce swelling and improve mobility. Osteopathy does not involve the use of drugs or surgery.

The most common condition treated by osteopaths is low back pain, which now affects two-thirds of the adult population of the UK and is the nation's leading cause of disability. Back pain is also very common in children and around 50% of children in Europe experience back pain at some time. Over £480 million a year is spent on services used by sufferers of back pain, including 14 million GP consultations, seven million therapy sessions and 800,000 hospital beds, and back problems and repetitive strain injuries cost British industry £5 billion each year.

The trouble with back pain is that it can do more than just give you a pain in the back. It can create difficulties with walking, sitting, bending and lifting and can even lead to depression and incontinence. It can also be the cause of pain in the buttocks, groin or legs (commonly called sciatica), in the head, neck, shoulders and arms. It can also be one of the effects of hip, knee and foot problems. Back pain can result from bad posture, a sudden jerky movement, a lumpy mattress or poor lifting techniques. It can also be caused by injury in a work place, by a sports accident or by muscular spasms. It often occurs during pregnancy or, because of decreased flexibility, as people get older. Osteopathic treatment is often the most effective first line of attack in correcting problems caused by back pain. Speedy access to osteopathic care for acute patients often averts the possibility of conditions becoming chronic. By correcting any underlying mechanical disturbances in the musculo-skeletal system, osteopaths can greatly relieve pain and distress, minimise dependency on drugs and slash the cost of treatment for side effects.

Many women are working mothers and combining both aspects of their lives can give rise to problems from the perennial headache to debilitating musculo-skeletal disorders. Many headaches originate from stiffness and tension in the neck and osteopathic treatment can often bring relief.

Pregnancy is a time when women are more aware of the workings of their body. It produces the largest postural change that a woman's body will undergo. For many years, osteopaths have used their skills to help relieve the aches and pains caused by weight and posture changes during and after pregnancy. For many women pregnancy means having to cope with a whole range of symptoms from back pain to morning sickness. As the baby grows in the womb, its extra weight results in a changed centre of gravity and posture changes from week to week. This can lead to a variety of aches and pains. As breast weight increases, this also causes changes and pain may occur in the upper back and neck.

Under the Osteopaths Act 1993, it is a criminal offence for anyone to practice as an osteopath unless registered with the General Osteopathic Council. The public can, therefore, be confident in visiting an osteopath that they will experience safe and competent treatment from a practitioner who adheres to a strict Code of Conduct. Trainee osteopaths study anatomy, physiology, pathology, biomechanics and clinical methods during a four or five year honours degree programme. Such wide-ranging medical training gives osteopaths the skills to diagnose conditions to determine where osteopathic treatment is appropriate, and where the patient should be referred to a GP for further investigation.

Osteopathic healthcare is available from registered osteopaths Stephen Hudson and Caroline Sampson at the Ashfield Practice, 22 Ashfield Road, Chippenham (Tel. 01249 659749; [www.wiltsosteopaths.co.uk](http://www.wiltsosteopaths.co.uk)).