

Got a question for our experts? Want to air your views? Have your say on these pages. This month, questions on complementary therapies

ASK THE EXPERTS



Health specialist Antonia Chitty returns to 'Ask the experts' this month, to answer your queries on complementary therapies



Labelling rules

I recently visited a homeopath who said he'd send me a remedy by post. When it arrived, I was surprised to find no medicine name, no ingredients and no expiry date on the bottle. How should the remedy be labelled? Name and address supplied

A Homeopathic medicines that are dispensed (that is, supplied on prescription) are exempt from most of the regulations for those sold over the counter, though they should have a sticker saying 'keep out of reach of children'. Unless otherwise authorised by the homeopath, they should normally include the name of the medicine and the dosage. Steven Kayne, Pharmacy Dean of the Faculty of Homeopathy told us: 'Best

practice now dictates that the name of the remedy and expiry date should be included.' If you have any concerns about a remedy you've been given, discuss them with your practitioner.

An active role

What is Consumers' Association (CA) doing about the value for money and effectiveness of complementary therapies? Don Schofield by e-mail

A We are actively involved in the topic. Over the last two years, *Health Which?* has assessed evidence for a wide range of therapies. It also runs regular updates on regulation issues and clinical trials on complementary therapies. *Which?* itself examined the subject of regulation in 'Healing bodies'

(October 1999, p20), and we have another article planned for later this year. CA has submitted evidence on complementary therapies to a House of Lords committee, demonstrating our concern that current regulation gives consumers little protection from bad practice.

Doctor's referral

Which complementary therapies are typically available by referral from your GP? Gill Castle Shrewsbury

A The main therapies include acupuncture, homeopathy, hypnotherapy, osteopathy, chiropractic and herbalism. However, you can't rely on finding all or any of them: a House of Lords Select Committee report, published last year, found that provision is patchy and depends on the attitude of your local primary care group or trust.

Dosage difference

I recently bought some St John's wort (SJW). The capsules contain 120 micrograms of active hypericin and the label recommends taking one a day. However, other brands provide a standard daily dose of 900 micrograms a day. Why is there such a difference? Richard King Bournemouth

A Scientific studies have used doses ranging from 400 to 2,700 micrograms of active hypericin, and more research is needed to confirm the appropriate amount. As a result, products are sold in different preparations and doses.

GET IN TOUCH

Our experts are now looking for questions on **buying a new car**, **travel vaccinations** and **tax**. You can send your questions or comments for publication by post or fax to 'Letters page' at our Hertford address, p50, or by e-mail to experts@which.net. *Which?* Online subscribers can also contact us via one of our forum groups.

We give £15-worth of *Which?* Books vouchers to the sender of our star letter; senders of all other letters printed receive £10 in vouchers.

We may edit letters, or use only an extract. We regret that our experts will answer only questions that we publish.





WRITEBACK

Share your views with other members

The fact that many herbal products can legally be sold as unlicensed medicines or food supplements means that manufacturers do not have to ensure quality, effectiveness and safety in the same way as for licensed medicines. We think regulation needs to be tightened up, and that consumers should be given clearer information about what doses are safe and effective. We're pleased that the Medicines Control Agency has reached agreement with the UK natural health sector over the need to improve regulation.

Help for arthritis

I have been consulting a homeopath for arthritis and have found my condition has not worsened. The visits cost money – but surely the cost is worth it to ward off this potentially crippling illness?
Anne Wilks
Whitstable, Kent

A Different people vary in their response to complementary therapies so it's difficult to predict who will benefit from a particular therapy. Research indicates that weekly acupuncture, usually over six to eight weeks, may bring long-term pain reduction, but more studies are needed for homeopathic remedies, aromatherapy, osteopathy and chiropractic.

Unless you can get therapies on the NHS, they can, as you say, become expensive. Discuss with the therapist how many sessions you'll need before you can expect to notice any benefit, and then review whether the therapy is helping. Exercise and a healthy diet can also help.

Unwanted privilege Chlorinated chicken

I subscribe to ONdigital, and received its new ON7TV guide. It said that, if I didn't return the reply-paid insert, I would be charged £1.69 a month for the privilege of receiving a magazine I don't want and never asked for. Aren't such opt-out offers illegal?

Tony Bailey
near Brighton

A We've received many complaints about this – but it is legal. The Unsolicited Goods and Services Act doesn't apply in this case, as you're already an ONdigital subscriber. ONdigital can send you its new magazine without your first opting in because it replaces its previous free magazine. You need to check your contract (the service agreement that you signed when you became a subscriber), but the one we saw contained a proviso reserving the right for ONdigital to change its guide and charge you for it, so long as you're notified in advance.

Where was Olympus?

I've had an Olympus digital camera for two years, and have been very impressed with it. Why didn't you include one in your April report?

Colin Gaskell
Harpden

A We had intended to, but the model which matched our test specifications was about to be modified and the new camera wasn't available in time to feature it. We hope to be able to include an Olympus model in our next camera feature.

In 'Food bugs rife in chicken' (March 2001, p9), you say that slaughterhouses spray chickens with a chlorine wash. Is organic chicken also sprayed in this way?

Amanda Buyukertas
Sutton, Surrey

A Yes. But it's something that the Soil Association is looking into, and there's a proposal to label birds which have been treated with high levels of chlorine. Currently, chlorine may be used in the scald tank, to loosen feathers before plucking, and for cleaning the chicken after evisceration. Organic birds must then be washed with drinkable water – this doesn't happen with standard birds.

Spare that tree

In April's 'Ask the experts' (p54), you said that the law allows one to cut overhanging branches back to the boundary. This is not the case if the tree has a tree preservation order on it or is in a conservation area.

Mary Hunt-Jones
Hampton

A The self-sown ash trees we referred to are unlikely to be protected. But trees that have particular historic, ornamental or wildlife value, or simply make a significant impact on their surroundings, can be individually protected by tree preservation orders (TPOs). These are issued by the local planning authority, which can tell you if any individual tree is protected and, if so, must grant permission before work is carried out, even by the owner.

There are some exceptions, such as dead or dying trees, but it's still best to seek advice before taking action.

For non-TPO trees in conservation areas, you must give at least six weeks' notice before any work is carried out and the planning authority may then object. Heavy fines can be imposed for damaging protected trees. For more information, see the DETR leaflet *Protected Trees: A Guide to Tree Preservation Orders*, available free on 0870 122 6236 or visit the DETR website www.detr.gov.uk

That's the ticket

Thanks to your article on air passenger ticket rights (April, p4), I was able to take my son skiing. I was due to travel with my wife when family illness prevented her from going. SwissAir refused to reissue the ticket in my son's name, but did a U-turn after I'd referred to the new regulations on the OFT's website.

Tony Hancock
Basingstoke

A We're pleased our advice paid off. In cases like this, the OFT can take action against any airline that is an Iata member or has a UK office. Both of these criteria apply to SwissAir.