

## Can a few AA batteries relieve pain, gout and depression? The answer will shock you

By [Alice Smith](#)

Last updated at 12:06 AM on 4th December 2011

Two thousand years ago, the Roman physician Scribonius Largus reported that headaches could be relieved with the sting of a live electric eel. Ever since then, scientists have been interested in the healing powers of electricity.

The buzz term at the moment is microcurrent therapy – or MCT – which refers to a plethora of home-use gadgets that manufacturers claim can relieve countless conditions.

With names such as Alpha-Stim and Microdoctor, these devices are typically powered by little more than a few AA batteries, and deliver a tiny current to the skin via clips or sticky pads. The charge is so weak, it cannot usually be felt.



© David Poole

Negative to positive: Joanne Thompson believes an Alpha-Stim device helped lift her depression

They are being touted as treatments for everything from joint and back pain to headaches, gout, multiple sclerosis and even depression.

Is this a revolution in symptom management and a one-size-fits-all alternative to drugs? Or are manufacturers cynically targeting vulnerable sufferers who will try – and pay – anything to alleviate chronic conditions?

Surprisingly, some experts are quite open to the concept. Our bodies are composed of billions of atoms, which produce electrical signals that run almost instantaneously through the body as nerve signals, controlling all bodily functions, both conscious and unconscious.

MCT device companies claim injury and illness upset these signals, and the treatment resets our 'natural electrical currents', aiding healing and reducing pain.

The concept will be familiar to the millions of Britons who have tried a TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machine, which delivers electricity to the skin's surface via sticky pads.

MCT typically involves electrical currents measuring less than one milliamperé – a thousandth of an ampere (a measurement of electrical current). To put this in perspective, a lightbulb may use about 500 milliamperes. TENS uses a higher electrical current than MCT, often above 60 milliamperes, to stimulate the nerves and block pain. 'New applications are mostly used for pain relief and soft tissue injury,' says Tim Watson, professor of physiotherapy at the University of Hertfordshire.

His team reviewed the clinical evidence for its efficacy in medical use two years ago and concluded that it is unquestionably effective. 'There is no doubt that MCT works,' says Prof Watson. 'But we don't yet know whether it's the current strength, the pulse pattern or the treatment duration that makes a difference.'

His team concluded that microcurrent is most effective when used for significantly longer than the daily 20 minutes recommended by most manufacturers.

'We went up to three hours a day in our trials, but there's no reason why it couldn't be used for longer,' he said.



AA batteries: Can they help relieve pain?

Even clinicians who are sceptical about MCT agree that our increasing dependence on painkillers means that there is a gap in the market for treatments that do not include drugs.

'We now know that patients need ever increasing amounts of painkillers as they develop a tolerance to them.

'They also become dependent on them and suffer from side effects,' says Dr Lourdes Gaspar, a consultant specialist in pain medicine.

'Manufacturers make outrageous claims [about MCT] that aren't substantiated,' says Dr Deane Halfpenny, consultant anaesthetist and pain specialist at the London Independent Hospital.

'However, I've read a recent study that showed that microcurrents reduce post-operative pain. And anecdotally it clearly makes a difference. If a patient wanted to use it, I wouldn't dissuade them on this basis. It's unlikely to cause any harm.'

Physiotherapist Andy Buckley says: 'I've been using a microcurrent device called a Tendonworks for the past 18 months for my older patients who have suffered injuries while jogging. Normal therapy might include mobilisation and exercises, and MCT works well when used in combination with these.'

Prof Watson, who has no affiliation to any company, suggests that as long as they carry the European safety mark and provide less than one milliamperé of power, all MCT machines are similar.

'Don't feel you have to spend lots of money. More expensive does not automatically mean better,' he says.

One patient who has reported remarkable results is Joanne Thompson, 32, a photographer who lives in Cambridgeshire with her husband Steve, 41, a senior executive in distribution, and their daughters, Ella, eight, and four-year-old Amy.

She developed depression four years ago after her youngest daughter was born with a rare bowel condition. Joanne says: 'By the time I went to my doctor the following December, I was having suicidal thoughts.

'I was put on antidepressants and referred to a therapist.

'For the next two years I was anxious and frequently in tears. I suffered panic attacks and had severe side effects from the medication – tummy upsets, nausea and weight gain.

'A friend of mine had been using a machine called Alpha-Stim to help with stress and she suggested I try it alongside the pills. I was sceptical, but did some research and was impressed by the clinical studies and testimonials.

'You attach the clips to your ears and turn it on. I used it daily for two to three hours and would fall asleep with it on.

'Within two months I felt a definite lift in my mood. After three months I felt I was able to cope with everyday life. It was a very gradual process.'

Dr Lesley Parkinson, a consultant clinical psychologist, believes Alpha-Stim may have had an effect. 'The pills didn't appear to have been working and they had been given plenty of opportunity to do so.

'Also, Joanne wasn't expecting MCT to work, which would indicate that the machine did help. Anything like this that doesn't have side effects is worth a try.'

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If you are depressed check out your amalgam fillings as these contain mercury which can cause depression. Best thing is to replace them with the white fillings or extract them. But check with a mercury testing lab to be sure before you wrench your teeth out. There are plenty on the net.

- Alistair Hillier Manser, Sandbanks UK, 04/12/2011 18:27

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Could be.

- Penny the mild mannered janitor, Hong Kong phooey, 04/12/2011 18:23

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No

-cyril, beford, 04/12/2011 18:08

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I have an Alpha Stim - I was desperate to try anything that would stop my anxiety on waking for which there was not explanation; it was just an overwhelming 'tear' I felt immediately I woke up and it was horrible and I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. About 2 weeks after using the Alpha Stim for 1 hour a day on waking I no longer feel anxious. I have to stress - as far as my conscious mind could tell me there was NO reason for this anxiety - it was a subconscious thing quite beyond my control or explanation. If the pay off is the death of a few cells in my ear lobes so be it

-nina, cambridge, 04/12/2011 17:13

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MICRO amps DM, not milli-amps - hence the name of MCT. Typical use is less than 600 microamps.

-Peter, Earth, 04/12/2011 17:02

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@Dave surely one is not only for paying for nuts and bolts (to speak) but also the technology itself and the research behind it. £209 to me is money well spent if it helps, which it does do in my case. It's also worth noting that although this technology is fairly new to the UK, it's been in the States for over 30 years and used by millions of people without any reports of side effects. Unfortunately, these type of forums allow for people to be ignorant. Some of the comments made are astounding. It's scientifically proven and wouldn't be for sale if it was dangerous. Not everyone will want one but each to their own. Don't try and put people off without having the facts or having read the research. AND the bigger question is why it's not available on prescription in the UK like it is in the States.

-Justelle, London, 04/12/2011 16:51

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another vitamin treatment, they used to say that radium would cure you, until they found that people got radion sickness. And even though this product may be harmless I doubt it would cure you of all your problems.

-mem, UK, 04/12/2011 15:19

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During the 20's and 30's when electricity was still a bit of a novelty there was a plethora of gadgets. One was to attach electrodes to the scalp as a cure for baldness. George Gershwin had one of these. He died of a brain tumour aged 39.

-bob, bristol, 04/12/2011 15:08

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It works for me but if I use it for too long I have poor sleep. Its about getting the right balance. Its very dear but it can be easily sold to recoup most of the money if it doesnt work for you. It took about 3 weeks to work for me.

-Craig, Atherton, 04/12/2011 14:08

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"Also, Joanne wasn't expecting MCT to work, which would indicate that the machine did help. Anything like this that doesn't have side effects is worth a try.....No side effects?? Until they discover them. Look at all the drugs that have been recalled and basically condemned or reclassified....."Our bodies are composed of billions of atoms, which produce electrical signals that run almost instantaneously through the body as nerve signals, controlling all bodily functions, both conscious and unconscious. MCT device compares claim injury and illness upset these signals, and the treatment results on "natural electrical currents", aiding healing and reducing pain.....When everything looks like a nail hit it with a hammer?"

-Aerie Linux, Sheffield, 04/12/2011 13:08

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