Complementary and Alternative Methods and Cancer

What are complementary and alternative methods?

Complementary and *alternative* are terms used to describe many kinds of products, practices, and systems that are not part of mainstream medicine. You may hear them used to refer to methods to help relieve symptoms and improve quality of life during cancer treatment. We call these "complementary" because they are used along with your medical treatment. You may sometimes hear them when discussing methods that claim to prevent, diagnose, or treat cancer. We call these "alternative" because they are used instead of proven medical treatments.

You may not hear about these treatments from your doctor or cancer team, but others may talk about things like traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, hypnosis, or machines that are supposed to find or cure cancer. Some people may recommend "body cleansing" with enemas or detoxification diets with special foods and preparation methods.

Some of these methods must be done by a person with formal education and training, such as art or music therapy, and may be offered along with regular cancer treatment. Others are given by people with informal or traditional training. They can involve everything from colon therapy to entirely different systems that don't use any of the medical treatments your doctor uses. Still other types of treatment may be recommended by the person who is selling a product in a store or TV infomercial, such as herbal products or juice from exotic fruits or vegetables.

Some methods take a lot of time and cost a lot of money, such as strict diets or travel to another country for special treatments. Others are fairly cheap and easy to use, like vitamins, herbs, or homeopathic remedies.

Why would people with cancer be interested in complementary and alternative methods?

People with cancer might think about using alternative or complementary methods for a number of reasons:

- They'd like to relieve the side effects of mainstream cancer treatment without having to take more medicine

- They are seeking a less unpleasant treatment approach that might have fewer side effects
- They want to take an active role in improving their own health and wellness
- They prefer alternative theories of health and disease, as well as alternative treatments

Complementary and alternative methods are often appealing because they use your own body, your own mind, or things found in nature. Some even promise wellness using a way that sounds simple, wholesome, and without side effects – something your doctor can't offer. Another plus is that these are things that you, and only you, choose to do.

Many of these methods almost never cause physical harm, while others can be dangerous and have even caused deaths. But by definition, complementary and alternative methods that claim to cure cancer are nearly all unproven – methods that are well-proven to safely fight cancer tend to be adopted into mainstream medicine fairly quickly. Still, there are methods that have been studied and shown to help a person feel better during cancer treatment.

The decision to use alternative or complementary methods is an important one, and it's yours to make. We have put together some suggestions to help you think through the issues and make the most informed and safest decision possible.

How are complementary methods used to manage cancer?

Some people believe that our current medical treatment in the US, which we refer to as mainstream medicine, is the only option they have when it comes to treating symptoms and side effects, relieving pain, and improving quality of life. But there are many complementary treatments you can use safely, right along with your medical treatment. Some people find that certain complementary methods are very useful to help control certain symptoms and improve the quality of their lives. They don't expect these methods to treat or cure the cancer.

Some cancer treatment centers offer some of these complementary therapies. (See "Integrative therapy" in the section called "What kinds of cancer treatment are there?") That means you get can get safe complementary treatments at your cancer treatment center without having to go out and find them yourself.

How can you know if the method you're thinking about is safe and whether it will help you? The information here can help you understand more about safety and think about whether and how you might want to use complementary or alternative methods.

What kinds of cancer treatment are there?

Proven treatments

Did you know that most new drugs made in research labs – even those that kill cancer cells in test tubes and animals – are eventually shown to not work for treating cancer in humans? We know this because new medical treatments are assumed to be ineffective until they are proven, by clinical studies in humans, to be useful.

Doctors who use mainstream or conventional cancer treatments focus on results of clinical studies (human testing). They don't prescribe drugs just because a drug company claims they work. All new medical treatments must be proven in studies that are carefully designed, supervised, and reviewed by leading experts in cancer treatment. Patient success stories, marketing brochures, and testimonials aren't enough evidence to start prescribing a new drug or using a different treatment.

Even the results from a single clinical trial are not enough to prove a treatment works. Evidence is built up, often starting with lab studies (cells in a dish, for example), then animal studies, then small studies in humans. These are done before larger clinical trials (human studies) are finally started. The clinical trials are needed to show whether a treatment actually works and is safe enough to use in people.

Along the way, study results are looked at to see how well they match other studies. Differences in results are carefully examined. Methods are reviewed to be sure that rigorous scientific procedures were used. All this helps doctors understand more about the treatment – and if it works, when and how to use it.

Proven treatment refers to treatments that have been tested in this way and found to be relatively safe and useful. The results of such studies are published in credible peer-reviewed journals. Peer-reviewed journals are those in which the articles are studied by other doctors or scientists in the field to be sure that they meet certain standards before being accepted and published.

Treatments that are tested in these ways are sometimes called *evidence-based*. They are generally adopted by doctors as part of mainstream medicine. Mainstream medicine (the usual type of treatment people get from medical doctors) may also be called standard treatment, conventional medicine, allopathic medicine, or Western medicine.

For the most part, the treatments used in mainstream medicine have been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Research and investigational treatments

Research or *investigational* treatments are still being studied in clinical trials (human testing). If the studies show that the benefits of the treatment outweigh the side effects, the Food and Drug Administration may approve it for regular use. Only then does the treatment become part of the standard mainstream treatment.

During the course of this research, the drug or treatment may be available to volunteers in the clinical trial along with mainstream medical treatment. In this case, only one part of the treatment would be unproven, while the rest is the usual traditional or conventional care.

To learn more about research and testing, see *Learning About New Cancer Treatments*. For more on taking part in human testing, see *Clinical Trials: What You Need to Know*.

Complementary therapy

Complementary therapy is used along with standard or mainstream medical treatment. Some complementary therapies may help relieve certain symptoms of cancer, relieve side effects of cancer treatment, or improve a patient's sense of well-being. Examples might include meditation to reduce stress, peppermint or ginger tea for nausea, and guided imagery to help relieve stress and pain during medical procedures. Over time, methods such as massage therapy, relaxation, and

meditation have been proven useful in scientific studies, and have been incorporated into mainstream treatment to improve quality of life. Some other complementary methods are used by patients seeking to improve wellness or relieve symptoms and side effects despite lack of credible evidence of effectiveness.

The American Cancer Society urges patients who are thinking about using any complementary or non-mainstream therapies to first discuss it with their health care team.

Integrative therapy

Integrative therapy is a term often used to describe the combined use of proven mainstream treatments and certain complementary methods. You may have heard the term *integrative oncology*. Some cancer treatment centers and clinics now offer this option for patients who might be helped by complementary methods as well as mainstream treatments. Integrative oncology departments of leading cancer centers typically limit the complementary methods they provide to ones with low risk of significant side effects and some credible evidence showing they can help reduce symptoms or improve physical or psychological health.

Alternative therapy

Alternative therapy is used **instead** of mainstream treatment. Alternative therapies are either unproven because they have not been scientifically tested, or they have been disproved (that is, they have been tested and found not to work).

Disproved: treatments not supported by evidence

Disproved or *disproven* are terms that may be used to describe a treatment that has been studied enough to find out that it does not work for a given condition. In medical circles, such a treatment is described by saying that studies “do not support claims that the treatment helps” a certain type of cancer or condition. These methods may cause the patient to suffer because they are not helpful, because they can delay the use of methods that can help, or because they actually cause harm.

The American Cancer Society urges patients who are thinking about using any alternative or complementary therapy to first discuss this with their health care team. But if you’re thinking of stopping your regular cancer treatment and using an alternative method, it’s even more important that you talk with your doctor first. See the section “What are the risks of not using mainstream cancer treatment?”

Fake treatment: quackery and fraud

Quackery refers to the promotion of methods that claim to prevent, diagnose, or cure cancers that are known to be false (disproven), or which are unproven and most likely false. These methods are often based on theories of disease and treatment that are contrary to accepted scientific ideas. Promoters of such methods often use patient testimonials as evidence of their effectiveness and safety. Many times, the treatment is claimed to cure other diseases as well as cancer.

Fraud goes a step beyond quackery. In this case, treatments are advertised deceptively by people whose main intent is to make money. Some of these treatment methods have been tested and found not to work. Some are known to be harmful. Others have not been tested, but the sellers still claim

that they can help you. For tips on avoiding fraud, see “Avoiding Fraud and Questionable Treatments” in the section called “Can I safely use an alternative or complementary therapy?”

If you suspect fraud in any kind of health treatment, you can contact the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA is listed in the blue pages of the phone book under “US Government.” Look under the heading “Health and Human Services.” Or visit their website at www.fda.gov.

If the promoted treatment is a dietary supplement, the Federal Trade Commission is responsible for enforcing the laws about how it’s marketed. (The FDA deals with how supplements are labeled. For companies or people offering other types of fraudulent treatments or services, other enforcement groups may be involved.) But many of these fraud-selling companies move to other countries, where they may find it easier to evade the authorities. You can report deceptive advertising and fraudulent practices to the FTC at www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov. (From there, you can choose “Complaint Assistant.”) For more on supplements and how to report problems with them, see *Dietary Supplements: What Is Safe?*

Other names and descriptions

Treatments that are not used in mainstream medicine may be described as *unconventional*, *non-conventional*, and *non-traditional* by mainstream medical doctors. These terms may be used to describe any complementary or alternative therapy. Some treatments, such as traditional Chinese medicine or Native American healing, are also used in complementary or alternative therapies. Of course, to the person who is part of the culture practicing these treatments, their native methods are usually called traditional and Western medicine is the non-traditional way.

Why are complementary and alternative therapies harder to evaluate?

The treatments are assumed to be safe

Many people choose complementary or alternative therapies because they think there are no harmful side effects from them. This is not always true. One big concern is that, with alternative treatments, the delay in mainstream treatment can allow the cancer to grow and spread to other parts of the body. Another is that some complementary and alternative therapies have been reported to cause serious problems or even deaths. Even so, most of these problems are not reported to the FDA by the patient or family, so no one else hears about them. Sometimes, if the patient is treated afterward by a doctor who writes up the problem for a medical journal, there may be reports of some of the more serious effects of these treatments. But it’s clearly impossible to be sure that all of the side effects are reported and published.

We do know that certain vitamins and minerals can increase the risk of cancer or other illnesses, especially if too much is taken. But when it happens to one person, it’s very easy to miss any link between the illness and the supplement. Large groups of people must be studied to find out about small increases in risk.

Some companies don’t follow the FDA’s rules about making claims and labeling supplements properly. In many cases, when herbal supplements have been tested, they were found to contain

very little or none of the listed ingredient. Although studies aren't done very often, when they are, they invariably find that many herbal supplements don't contain what's on the label. Some even contain contaminants that could be harmful to certain people.

It has long been known that if a company does not carefully control the growing, harvesting, and manufacturing processes for their product, it's possible for harmful contaminants to get into dietary supplements. Serious illnesses and even deaths have resulted from these kinds of problems. For more information on dietary supplements, see *Dietary Supplements: What is Safe?*

Finally, some of these companies know that they're operating illegally. Some will put man-made drugs into an "all natural" supplement, and when discovered, will move to a country where regulations are more lax than the United States. Or they will change names and continue their practices until they are discovered again.

If you've experienced a serious side effect from an herb or dietary supplement, you can report it to the FDA's Medwatch program. (See the "To learn more" section.)

In contrast to dietary supplements and alternative therapies, many of the complementary mind-body methods are very safe. It's rare for people to have problems with activities like meditation or music therapy.

At the other extreme, some alternative biological therapies are no less toxic than chemotherapy, so safety studies are needed. Even though the details of clinical trials for testing drugs and complementary or alternative methods may differ, the basic principles are the same.

Some treatments are assumed to be effective

There are those who think that treatments derived from folk remedies that have been used for thousands of years must work. Bloodletting, for example, was enthusiastically used for more than 2000 years until data showed that it didn't work against fevers and pneumonia.

It's important to keep in mind that just because a treatment method has been used a long time does not mean that it works. In historical times when these treatments were all that was available, people of all ages died of illnesses that can now be prevented, treated, or cured. Still, it's very common for people who think you should try these methods to remind you of their long history.

When scientific studies are not done, it's hard to tell what is caused by the illness and what is caused by the treatment. Herbal treatments that are given for illnesses that go away on their own may be given credit for curing the person. Or the treatment might make the person feel better for a short time but have no lasting effect.

The expectation effect

It's quite common for people to feel better after almost any kind of treatment that they expect to help them. This is called the *placebo* effect, and it's one form of the expectation effect. The placebo effect means that if the person expects the treatment to help, he or she may feel better after getting it – even if the treatment does nothing for the underlying problem. This effect usually lasts only a short time, and seems to have something to do with the body's own chemical ability to relieve pain or certain other symptoms for up to a few hours.

The expectation effect can also work in a less pleasant way. A person who expects a strong treatment to have side effects may notice a headache, fatigue, nausea, or other symptom even though he or she got a sham (inactive) treatment. This has been named the *nocebo* effect. This effect is one reason why, in the most careful scientific studies, side effects are listed for the placebo group as well as the treatment group.

There are also many other ways in which clinical trials (human research studies) can appear to show effects when there's no actual effect. For example, studies that are very small, have high dropout rates, or aren't randomized can seem to show effects that really don't exist. This can happen in all kinds of research studies, not just studies of complementary and alternative treatments.

When scientific studies are not carefully designed and reported (such as when there is no control group or the participants aren't randomized), it's impossible to separate these kinds of effects from some of the short-term treatment effects. Even studies that have a control group but don't use a placebo may have different outcomes than those with a placebo group.

The placebo effect, among other effects, may explain one of the reasons that people keep using certain types of complementary or alternative methods that don't help the underlying disease. If they feel better for a few hours, it may be worthwhile for them to keep using the method as long as it does not hurt them. It does not mean that it will have the same effect on everyone who tries it, though, and it's not expected to affect the underlying illness. You can read more about these effects and others in *Placebo Effect*.

Testing is not required by law

Although there are requirements about how dietary supplements must be made and labeled, no one requires that they be tested to find out whether they actually help, or whether they are safe to use.

This is opposite from the way mainstream drugs are handled by the FDA. With medicines, even ones that are sold over the counter, the maker of the drug must show that it works before they can ever sell it. Each drug must also be carefully tested to find out about its risks and side effects to be sure it is safe before it can be sold.

By contrast, the FDA does not require proof that dietary supplements have been tested before they are sold. The sellers are allowed to make certain general health claims without showing proof, as long as they don't say that the product can diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent a specific disease. And the FDA regards most dietary supplements as safe until proven otherwise. The burden of proof is on the FDA to show that a dietary supplement isn't safe, which can only happen after the product is on the market.

One of the reasons for these differences is that, unlike drugs, supplements are not intended to treat, diagnose, prevent, or cure diseases. This means supplements are **not** allowed to make claims such as "reduces arthritic pain" or "treats heart disease." Claims like these can only be made for drugs that have been proven to do what they claim. **Products that are proven to have a significant effect on any disease are considered drugs by the FDA and are strictly regulated.**

Other methods, such as massage therapy, acupuncture, and naturopathy have come into wide use with no requirement for testing to see how well they work. Some complementary and alternative providers or methods may be licensed or regulated by individual states, but nationally there are no specific rules governing the providers or practices of a particular treatment. Of course, regulations,

licenses, or certificates do not guarantee safe and effective treatment from any provider, but they can give you information and may offer more options if something does go wrong.

Good research studies take time and care

It's hard for some people to believe that the treatments their family and friends recommend have no proof that they work. They may hear convincing stories of a person who was told they had cancer, then, after using this treatment, the patient was cured and healthy again.

Everyone wants to believe these hopeful stories. But stories about amazing cures cannot be thought of as evidence that a treatment works. Most of the time, there's no way to be sure the stories are true. It's often not possible to know that the person described in the story had the disease which treatment helped, or whether he or she got sick again later – it's hard to find out if the person is still alive.

Controlled human studies (clinical trials) are the best way to find out if a treatment works. Some of the clinical trials for complementary methods are done differently than those for drugs and other mainstream treatments. This is especially true of older studies that took place when these methods first started to be tested, although many studies have similar problems even today. Common problems include things like:

- Sometimes the study does not have a placebo group or even a control group. In studying some methods (for example, acupuncture and some other hands-on methods), it's almost impossible to come up with a good placebo method for the control group.
- If there is a placebo group, the people in the study may not be randomized (that is, randomly put into one group or the other), which often leads to biased results.
- There might not be enough people in the study to show any effect.
- Sometimes even when there is a placebo group, the studies aren't blinded, meaning that the researchers know who is getting placebo or standard treatment. Knowing this information can lead to biased results.

It takes time and money to get careful clinical trials done. How long a clinical trial takes depends partly on what's being tested. For instance, it may take several years to show that a treatment helps survival, but only a few months to show that it helps nausea related to chemotherapy. Since the companies that make supplements or offer complementary therapies don't have to carefully test them, and often don't before selling them, it's left to other researchers to look into their claims.

Because there are so many types of complementary therapies, it may be a long time after a treatment is first offered before studies are published that can show whether it actually helps. Because of the way studies are set up, the small early studies often suggest that such treatments work, but then later, better-constructed studies show that they really don't. This can be confusing and frustrating when a person wants information to make a decision right now. And even for treatments that have been studied, a person trying to look it up may find old studies that seem to show it helps, and newer studies that show it doesn't. The old information is still around, and sometimes gets much more attention. Some sellers even promote the older studies and don't mention the new ones, which can make it hard to know what to believe.

Finding reliable studies can be a challenge

The good news is that more and more doctors and scientists are now studying complementary methods with the same careful methods used to study drugs. Results from many of these studies are often published in reliable, mainstream medical journals. As more of these studies are completed, patients and healthcare professionals will have better information to use when making decisions about these treatments.

The bad news is that some of the main sources health professionals use to look up this kind of information are increasingly tainted by journals that aren't carefully reviewed. Articles may be accepted and published even though they may contain inaccurate information. The journal might not have the means for expert review, and may overlook certain kinds of errors. When news outlets pick up on these kinds of studies, they may not be aware of or recognize these problems.

> If it's hard to find information from a reliable expert source about a cancer treatment method, it might mean that the method has not yet been studied enough to show that it works in people.

Some researchers publish results of low-quality studies in journals with names that may sound very much like respected, well-known journals. When these journals get research studies, they might not have qualified reviewers or the rigorous evaluation process that should be used to decide if the study is credible and worth publishing. They might take the researcher's data at face value, rather than carefully checking all of the methods and numbers. They might not require careful scientific methods for studies they publish. Mistakes can be missed because of a lax or rushed review process, and end up being published as truth. In fact, it's been learned that a number of journals have accepted and published papers submitted by "researchers" who bought their scientific papers from commercial companies or writers. Not only does this suggest lack of careful review, it raises the possibility of bias in favor of commercial products.

Some journals that do try to publish good information may still end up accidentally distorting rather than clarifying the scientific picture. For example, studies that show a treatment gets good results are much more interesting than studies that show no difference between the treatment and control groups. Researchers often don't bother to take the time to finalize manuscripts and submit them to journals when their studies showed no effect, and even if they do, journals are less eager to publish these results. This means that most of the studies that have useful information showing that a treatment doesn't work are never published, and the few that do show some difference are. It also means that even the methods that don't actually work usually will have a few small studies in the literature suggesting that they do. Even when well-designed studies are later published showing no effect, the older low-quality studies are still around. Sometimes people don't know what to believe.

In addition, there are unscrupulous people who set up internet or even printed journals just to promote certain types of treatment. They may offer pseudo-science – statements that look and sound scientific, but aren't. This makes it harder to learn about these treatments, since the glowing information put out by the fake journal makes it sound like it works and has few or no side effects. And many companies that offer products for sale will have "research" on their website that sounds

good but was never published in peer-reviewed journals. Sometimes companies will even link their claims to real research studies in the National Library of Medicine, knowing that most people won't read the studies – but also knowing that even if they do, most people won't understand that the studies weren't about their product.

With hundreds of new journals cropping up in the past few years, and the number growing every day, it can be a challenge to know which ones are reporting reliable results.

The bottom line is that, if you can't find reliable information from researchers who don't have a stake in the product, it's very likely that the research proving that it works in humans has not been done. That means there's no proof that the method works in people.

For more information on the research and testing of cancer treatments, see *Learning About New Cancer Treatments*.

What are the risks of not using mainstream cancer treatment?

Mainstream cancer treatments such as radiation, chemotherapy, and surgery can be unpleasant. But they have been scientifically tested and proven to work for treating cancer. Even though the side effects of mainstream cancer treatment can be serious, these treatments help you fight a life-threatening disease.

People with cancer who choose alternative medicine instead of mainstream cancer treatments may be putting themselves at serious risk. They are giving up the only proven methods of treating their disease. Delays or interruptions in standard treatment can give the cancer more time to grow. Even early stage cancers can become impossible to treat successfully if effective treatment is delayed long enough. And even when cancer reaches a stage where cure is not possible, it's important to remember that mainstream care can still offer a lot in the way of cancer control and comfort.

Can I safely use an alternative or complementary therapy?

Many people with cancer use one or more kinds of alternative or complementary therapies. And they often don't tell their doctors about these decisions. The best approach is to look carefully at your choices. Talk to your doctor about any method you are using or thinking about trying. There are many complementary methods you can safely use along with standard treatment to help relieve symptoms or side effects, to ease pain, and to help you enjoy life more. Even if they aren't fully tested, you can choose methods that don't usually cause harm and won't interfere with your cancer treatment.

Here are examples of some complementary methods that some people have found helpful and safe when used along with standard medical treatment:

- **Acupuncture:** Acupuncture is a technique in which very thin needles are put into the body to treat a number of symptoms. It may help with mild pain and some types of nausea.
- **Aromatherapy:** Aromatherapy is the use of fragrant substances, called essential oils, distilled from plants to alter mood or improve symptoms such as stress or nausea.

- **Art therapy:** Art therapy is used to help people with physical and emotional problems by using creative activities to express emotions.
- **Biofeedback:** Biofeedback is a treatment method that uses monitoring devices to help people gain conscious control over physical processes that are usually controlled automatically, such as heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, sweating, and muscle tension.
- **Labyrinth walking:** Involves a meditative walk along a set circular pathway that goes to the center and comes back out. Labyrinths can also be "walked" online or on a grooved board following the curved path with a finger.
- **Massage therapy:** Massage involves manipulation, rubbing, and kneading of the body's muscle and soft tissue. Some studies suggest massage can decrease stress, anxiety, depression, and pain and increase alertness.
- **Meditation:** Meditation is a mind-body process in which a person uses concentration or reflection to relax the body and calm the mind.
- **Music therapy:** Music therapy is offered by trained healthcare professionals who use music to promote healing and enhance quality of life.
- **Prayer and spirituality:** Spirituality is generally described as an awareness of something greater than the individual self. It's often expressed through religion and/or prayer, but there are many other paths of spiritual pursuit and expression.
- **Tai chi:** Tai chi is an ancient Chinese martial art. It's a mind-body system that uses movement, meditation, and breathing to improve health and well being. It's been shown to improve strength and balance in some people.
- **Yoga:** Yoga is a form of non-aerobic exercise that involves a program of precise posture and breathing activities.

The American Cancer Society recommends discussing all types of complementary or alternative treatments with your cancer treatment doctor (oncologist) and health care team.

Questions to ask about alternative and complementary therapies

If you are thinking about using any method instead of evidence-based medical treatment, you may want to think about these questions:

- What claims are made about the treatment? That it can relieve symptoms or side effects? That it can improve health? Be very suspicious of any treatment that says it can cure cancer. Claims that a treatment can cure all cancers or that it can cure cancer and other difficult-to-treat diseases (including chronic fatigue, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, etc.) are sure to be false.
- What are the qualifications of those supporting the treatment? Are they medical doctors? Are they recognized experts in cancer care? In complementary medicines? If you're seeing a complementary or alternative practitioner, find out about their training and education.
- Have scientific studies or clinical trials (in humans) been done to find out whether this treatment works? What side effects have been reported?

- Have the findings been published in trustworthy journals after being reviewed by other scientists who are experts in the same field?
- How is information about the method given? Is it promoted only in the mass media, such as books, magazines, the Internet, TV, infomercials, and radio talk shows rather than in scientific or medical journals?
- Is the method widely available for use within the health-care community? Once a treatment is found safe and useful, it's usually widely adopted by other professionals. Beware of treatments you can only get in one clinic, especially if that clinic is in a country with more lax patient protection laws that those in the United States or the European Union.
- What's known about the safety of the treatment? Could it be harmful or interact badly with your other medicines or supplements?

Avoiding fraud and questionable treatments

Use the checklist below to spot treatments that might be questionable. Keep in mind that if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. If you're not sure, talk to your doctor or nurse before moving ahead.

- Does the treatment promise a cure for all cancers?
- Are you told not to use recommended or standard (mainstream) medical treatment?
- Does the treatment claim to offer benefits, but no side effects? Even herbs and vitamins have side effects. If the treatment is marketed as having no side effects, it has not likely been studied in rigorous clinical trials, where side effects would be seen.
- Is the treatment or drug only offered by one person or clinic?
- Does the treatment require you to travel to another country?
- Do the promoters use terms like "scientific breakthrough," "miracle cure," "secret ingredient," or "ancient remedy"?
- Are you offered personal stories of amazing results, but no actual scientific evidence?
- Do the promoters attack the medical or scientific community?

Again, there are some safe complementary therapies out there that can help you feel better. But there are other treatments that can hurt you. Before investing your money and time in any non-traditional medicine, please talk to your doctor about whether or not it may help you in your fight against cancer.

Will my insurance cover alternative and complementary therapies?

Many insurance companies are starting to cover some of the more widely accepted complementary methods of treatment. Many major insurers, including Blue Cross and Medicare, cover one or

more complementary methods of treatment. Acupuncture and chiropractic therapy are most often covered. Contact your insurance company to find out what your plan covers.

If possible, get your doctor to write you a referral or a recommendation for the complementary therapy you want to use. Many insurance companies require that the method be shown to be reasonable and medically necessary, and it may help later on to have your doctor's recommendation.

Insurance companies usually will not cover methods that have not been proven to be helpful for the illness or symptom you have.

How do I talk to my doctor about alternative and complementary methods?

Many people with cancer are afraid to discuss complementary and alternative methods with their doctors. It's true that many doctors may not know about the uses, risks, and potential benefits of these unconventional treatments. This lack of knowledge can widen the gap between patient and doctor when it comes to using complementary methods along with regular cancer treatment. But this doesn't have to stop you. You can help bridge the gap in a number of ways:

- Look for information from respected sources that you can trust regarding the potential benefits and risks of the treatment you are thinking about.
- When you share this information with your doctor, try to do it in a way that shows you know that your doctor wants what's best for you. Let him or her know that you are thinking about a complementary treatment and that you want to make sure it won't interfere with your regular medical treatment.
- If you're thinking of an alternative treatment, let the doctor know what you're considering. Ask the doctor about any studies on this method, and what options you might still have if the alternative treatment doesn't work.
- Make a list of questions and bring it along with any other information you want to talk about. Ask your doctor to be a supportive partner as you learn more about other options and your treatment process.
- Bring a friend or family member with you to the doctor's office to support you. Your loved one can also help you talk with your doctor and relieve some of the stress of having to make decisions alone.
- Listen to what the doctor has to say, and try to understand his or her point of view. If the treatment you're thinking about will cause problems with your medical treatment, discuss safer choices together.
- Don't delay or skip regular treatment without warning. If you're thinking about stopping or not taking mainstream treatment, please talk to your doctor about this. Even though you may be giving up the only proven treatment for your cancer, this is still your choice to make.
- Be sure to ask your doctor if there are mainstream methods for treating the side effects or symptoms you're having during and after your treatment. There are many supportive medical treatments that can make you feel better.

- If you're taking dietary supplements, make a complete list of what you're taking and the amount of each. Many supplements can interact in harmful ways with other medicines, so talk with your doctor and pharmacist about your supplements and medicines. Report any changes in your supplement use to your health care team.
- If you are pregnant or breast-feeding, ask about the risks and effects of complementary or alternative methods. Never give herbal medicines to children without talking to their doctors first.
- Ask your doctor to help you identify possible fraud and fraudulent products. (See the list under "Avoiding fraud and questionable treatments" in the section "Can I safely use a complementary or alternative therapy?")

Using a complementary or alternative method is your decision

It's common to find much less high-quality, objective information about complementary and alternative methods than about mainstream treatments. This is one of the reasons that it is sometimes impossible to say much about whether a complementary method is likely to help you, or even how safe it might be. That's why you should try to learn about a treatment before you use it. Even if some information isn't available, the limitations of what is known can help you make your decision.

The choice to use complementary or alternative methods is yours. You can use them more safely if you:

- Learn about the risks and benefits of each therapy from reliable scientific sources.
- Talk with your doctor about your plans. Ask about risks and benefits and find out about possible interactions with mainstream treatments.
- Ask your doctor or cancer care team to refer you to someone who is reliable and trusted if you need a practitioner for your non-mainstream treatment (such as for massage therapy).
- Talk with your doctor before you use a self-prescribed remedy instead of the medicine your doctor prescribed.
- Know for sure whether you are giving up proven treatment for an unproven one. (If you decide to do this, ask your doctor beforehand what options might still work for you if the alternative treatment fails.)
- Don't give up a proven treatment for one that has been disproven. (Disproven treatments are different from unproven treatments, which may not been studied. Disproven methods have been studied and found not to work.)
- Watch out for signs of fraud or misleading claims.
- Keep in mind that most complementary and alternative methods have not been tested for safety in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding – effects on a fetus or nursing child are mostly unknown.

- Talk with your child's doctor before giving supplements or other remedies to your child.

To learn more about any treatment, please call us to find out what information we have to help you make your decision, or visit our website at www.cancer.org.

To learn more

More information from your American Cancer Society

The following information on complementary and alternative therapies may also be helpful to you. These materials may read online or ordered from our toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345.

Dietary Supplements: What Is Safe?

Learning About New Cancer Treatments

Learning About New Ways to Prevent Cancer

Placebo Effect

Clinical Trials: What You Need to Know

American Cancer Society Operational Statement on Complementary and Alternative Methods of Cancer Management

National organizations and websites*

There's a great deal of interest in complementary and alternative therapies. The Internet makes it possible for people to share ideas and information very quickly. But too often information on the Internet is written by promoters of useless treatments. Along with the American Cancer Society, the following is a partial list of websites and phone numbers of reputable groups that provide reliable information on complementary and alternative therapies:

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH)
Toll-free number: 1-888-644-6226
TTY: 1-866-464-3615
Website: https://nccih.nih.gov/

Has information on complementary and alternative therapy -related topics and clinical trials

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center
About Herbs and Botanicals
Website: www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine/about-herbs-botanicals-other-products

For evidence-based information about herbs, botanicals, supplements, and more

United States Food and Drug Administration
Toll-free number: 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)
Website: www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/default.htm

Learn more about herbs and dietary supplements. You can also **report side effects or other adverse events** (harmful or bad effects) caused by a dietary supplement to Medwatch at 1-800-FDA-1088 (1-800-332-1088) or visit www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch

United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Information Center
Phone: 1-301-504-5414
Website: http://fnic.nal.usda.gov

Find out about dietary supplements, vitamins, and minerals. Choose "Dietary Supplements" from the left menu bar

National Cancer Institute
Toll-free number: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)
TTY: 1-800-332-8615
Website: www.cancer.gov

For complementary and alternative therapy information, visit: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/treatment/cam

United States Federal Trade Commission
Toll-free number: 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357)
Website: www.ftc.gov/curious

Learn about cancer ads, offers, scams, and unproven treatments. You can also log complaints that can help detect patterns of wrong-doing and lead to investigations and prosecutions. (The FTC does not resolve individual consumer complaints.)

National Council Against Health Fraud
Website: www.ncahf.org

A private, non-profit, voluntary health agency that looks at health misinformation, fraud, and quackery as public health problems

Quackwatch
Website: www.quackwatch.org

An international network of people who are concerned about health-related frauds, myths, fads, fallacies, and misconduct. Its main focus is on quackery-related information that is difficult or impossible to get elsewhere.

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit www.cancer.org.

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For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society
1-800-227-2345 or www.cancer.org