Complementary and Integrative Methods

Complementary and integrative medicine are products and practices used along with standard medical care to help manage symptoms and side effects from cancer and its treatment. Learn what these terms mean and find information to help you make the most informed and safest decision about whether to use them.

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What Are Complementary and Integrative Methods?

*Complementary* and *integrative* are terms used to describe many kinds of products and practices that are not part of standard medical care but may be used by people with cancer to better manage cancer-related symptoms and side effects.

- **Complementary methods** refers to supportive methods used along with standard medical treatment. They are not cancer treatments themselves but may be used to help relieve symptoms of cancer and side effects of treatment. The use of complementary treatments may improve wellbeing and quality of life. Some
examples of complementary therapies are meditation, nutrition, physical activity, acupuncture, yoga, guided imagery, reflexology, and massage.

- **Standard treatments** are based on research studies that show that the treatment is safe and effective in one or more types of cancer. Examples of standard cancer treatments are surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, and hormonal therapy. There are also standard treatments that can help with many of the side effects of cancer and its treatment, such as medicines to help with pain or nausea.

- **Integrative medicine** refers to the combined use of standard medical treatments and certain complementary methods, most often to relieve the symptoms of cancer and side effects of treatment.

Complementary methods are different from *alternative treatments*¹. While complementary methods are meant to be *used with and support* standard treatments, alternative methods are *used instead of* standard treatments.

Treatments that are not used in mainstream medicine -- including complementary and alternative therapies -- may be described as unconventional, non-conventional, or non-traditional by mainstream medical doctors. Some treatments, such as traditional Chinese medicine or Native American healing, might also be considered 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, while Western medicine is the non-traditional way.

**Why do people with cancer use complementary methods?**

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

- They want to do everything they can to fight the cancer.
- They’d like to relieve the side effects of mainstream cancer treatment without having to take more medicine.
- They are seeking a treatment approach that might have fewer side effects.
- They have a friend or family member who suggested a complementary method.

Complementary methods may be appealing because they use your own body, your own mind, or things found in nature. And most complementary methods rarely cause harm.
Using a complementary method is your decision

It’s important to learn as much as possible about a treatment before you use it. But be aware that the information available about many complementary methods often includes less high-quality research than what is available 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 how safe it might be. Even if only limited information is available, understanding the limits of what is known can help you make your decision.

The choice to use complementary or integrative 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 to use any self-prescribed remedy instead of medicine they prescribed. Ask about risks and benefits and find out about possible interactions with standard treatments.
- Ask your doctor or cancer care team to refer you to someone who is reliable and trusted if you need a practitioner for a complementary treatment (such as for massage therapy).
- Keep in mind that most complementary methods have not been tested for safety in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, so the possible 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.

You can find more information about specific types of complementary and integrative methods on the National Cancer Institute website, www.cancer.gov\(^2\).

Hyperlinks


References


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Where Can I Find Trustworthy Info on Complementary and Integrative Methods?
There’s a great deal of interest in complementary and integrative methods, and information can be found in a wide variety of sources. This can make it hard to know what’s true and who to trust.

**Why is it hard to find trustworthy information about complementary therapies?**

**Testing may not be required by law**

Unlike the case with drug treatments, treatments that do not make claims to treat specific diseases or side effects can be sold without having to be tested in scientific studies in the United States. This can lead to a lack of data about whether the treatment is safe and effective.

This is true for many dietary supplements. There are requirements about how dietary supplements must be made and labeled, but no requirements that they be tested to find out if they actually help, or if they are safe to use.

There have been some studies of complementary methods such as massage therapy and acupuncture. Most often they are shown to be safe, and some studies have found they may be helpful when used along with standard treatments.

**Some treatments are assumed to be safe**

Some people choose complementary therapies because they think they don’t have any harmful side effects. This may not be true. Some complementary therapies have been found to cause serious problems. Even so, most of these problems are not reported to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), so they are not studied.

For example, we know that certain vitamins and minerals can increase the risk of some cancers or other illnesses, especially if too much is taken. Also, it has been shown that some complementary methods can interfere with standard treatments.

However, many complementary mind-body methods are very safe. It’s rare for people to have problems with activities like meditation or music therapy.

**Some treatments are assumed to be effective**

Some people might think that treatments derived from natural products or from folk remedies that have been used for thousands of years must work and be safe. However,
just because a treatment method is 'natural' or has been used a long time does not mean that it works and is safe.

When scientific studies have not been done, it can be hard to tell if a person's illness is getting better because of 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.

Finding reliable information can be a challenge

Controlled human studies (clinical trials) are the best way to find out if a treatment works. These studies typically include large groups of people, compare new treatments to treatments known to work, control who gets which treatment, and carefully measure the benefits and harms of each treatment. This can take a good bit of time and money. But clinical trials are vital to show that a treatment is safe and effective.

When looking for studies on a particular treatment, it is important to know whether a source can be trusted. It is best to look for studies published in reliable, mainstream medical journals.

If it’s hard to find information from a reliable expert source about a complementary method, it could mean that the method has not yet been studied enough to show if it works in people. 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 likely that there isn’t much proof that the method works in people.

Where can I find trustworthy information about complementary methods?

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 Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Information Center Phone: 1-301-504-5414 Website: https://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic\(^5\) Find out about dietary supplements, vitamins, and minerals. Choose “Dietary Supplements” from the left menu bar.

National Cancer Institute’s Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine Website: https://cam.cancer.gov\(^6\) Offers in-depth information about complementary and alternative therapies with a focus on cancer. Includes sections on talking to your healthcare provider about CAM, information about specific therapies and frequently asked questions.

Hyperlinks


References


Which Complementary Methods Are Likely Safe?

There are a number of complementary methods that can be safely used along with standard cancer treatment. These methods may help relieve symptoms or side effects, ease pain, and help you enjoy life more. While they aren’t fully tested, many are not usually harmful and can be used along with your treatment.

Here are examples of complementary methods that some people have found helpful and safe when used along with standard medical treatment. Be sure to talk with your cancer care team before trying any of these.

- **Acupressure**: Putting pressure on or rubbing specific parts of the body to help control symptoms.
- **Acupuncture**: A technique in which very thin needles are put into the body to help treat a number of symptoms, such as mild pain and some types of nausea.
- **Aromatherapy**: The use of fragrant substances, called essential oils, distilled from plants to alter mood or improve symptoms such as stress or nausea. These oils can be inhaled or diluted and rubbed on the skin.
- **Art therapy**: Using creative activities to help people express emotions.
- **Biofeedback**: A technique 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 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**: Involves manipulation, rubbing, and kneading of the body’s
muscles and other soft tissues. May help decrease stress, anxiety, depression, and pain, and increase alertness.

- **Meditation:** A mind-body process in which a person uses concentration or reflection to relax the body and calm the mind.
- **Music therapy:** The use of music to promote healing and enhance quality of life.
- **Spirituality and prayer:** Generally described as an awareness of something greater than the individual self. Often expressed through religion and/or prayer, but there are many other paths of spiritual pursuit and expression.
- **Tai chi:** A mind-body system that uses movement, meditation, and breathing to improve health and well being. It’s been shown to help improve strength and balance in some people.
- **Yoga:** A form of non-aerobic exercise that involves a program of precise posture and breathing activities.

Some other types of complementary methods, such as [dietary supplements](#), have generally not been proven to help prevent or treat cancer or its symptoms, and might sometimes even cause harm. The American Cancer Society recommends discussing any type of complementary treatment you are considering with your cancer treatment team before you try it.

**Hyperlinks**


**References**


Will My Insurance Cover Complementary and Integrative Therapies?

Many insurance companies are starting to cover at least some of the costs for more widely accepted complementary and integrative methods. For example, acupuncture,
chiropractic therapy, and massage are most often covered. If you are interested in trying some type of complementary therapy, contact your insurance company to find out what your plan covers. You may want to ask them:

- Does my insurance plan provide any coverage for [the complementary method you are interested in trying]? If so, how much coverage is provided and for how long?
- How much will I need to pay out of pocket for this treatment?
- Do I need a prescription or referral for this treatment?
- Do I need to get this service preauthorized?
- Do I need to see a practitioner who is in my network? If so, will any coverage be provided if I go out of network?

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.

References


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How Do I Talk to My Doctor About Complementary and Integrative Methods?

Many people with cancer are afraid to discuss complementary and integrative methods with their cancer care team. Some providers may not know all about the uses, risks, and
potential benefits of these treatments. But this shouldn’t stop you from talking to your cancer care team. Here are some tips to help with this conversation:

- Look for information from respected, trustworthy sources about the potential benefits and risks of the treatment you are thinking about.
- When you share this information with your cancer care team, try to do it in a way that shows you know that your team wants what’s best for you. Let them 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.
- Make a list of questions and bring it with you, 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 your appointment to support you. Your loved one can also help you talk with your cancer team and relieve some of the stress of having to make decisions alone.
- Listen to what the cancer care team has to say, and try to understand their point of view. If the treatment you’re thinking about might cause problems with your medical treatment, discuss safer choices together.
- To help ensure you’re aware of all of your options, ask your team 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 already 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 cancer medicines (or 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 breastfeeding, ask about the possible risks and side effects of complementary methods.
- Never give herbal medicines to children without talking to their doctors first.

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The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team (www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html)

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