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Alternative Medicine

Alternative medicine includes many kinds of products, practices, and systems that are not part of mainstream medicine. Learn about how they are used by people with cancer.

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What Is Alternative Medicine?

Alternative medicine refers to unproven or disproven methods used instead of standard medical treatments to prevent, diagnose, or treat cancer. They have either not been thoroughly tested in [clinical trials](#)¹, or they have been tested and found not to work against cancer. Some examples of alternative methods include special diets, certain supplements and herbs, high doses of vitamins, homeopathy, laetrile, and Rife machines. Many alternative medicine providers suggest a combination of these types of treatments.

Standard treatments are based on research studies that show that the treatment is safe and effective against one or more types of cancer. There are also standard treatments to help with many of the side effects of cancer and cancer treatment. Examples of standard treatments include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, hormonal therapy, and supportive medicines to help

with pain, nausea, or other problems.

Alternative medicine is different from **complementary therapies**. [Complementary methods](#)² are used **along with** and support standard treatments. Alternative methods are used **instead of** standard treatments.

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, while Western medicine is the non-traditional way.

Why do people with cancer use alternative methods?

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

- They want to do everything they can to fight the cancer.
- They are seeking a treatment approach that might have fewer side effects.
- They want to be able to control how their cancer is treated.
- They prefer alternative theories of health and disease, as well as alternative treatments.
- They may have seen information online or in other places that sounds helpful.

Some alternative methods may be appealing because they use your own body and mind, or things found in nature. Some even promise wellness using methods that sound simple, natural, and without side effects, which is rarely true of standard cancer treatments.

While some alternative methods rarely cause harm, others can have dangerous or even life-threatening side effects. Even when there are few harms with a particular alternative treatment, research has shown that people who use alternative methods instead of conventional cancer treatment for the most common curable cancers have a greater risk of dying from their cancer.

By definition, alternative methods have not been studied enough to show that they are effective in treating cancer, or they have been studied and shown to not be effective. Methods that are proven by research to effectively fight cancer tend to be used in

standard medicine fairly quickly.

Using alternative medicine is your decision

The decision to use alternative 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.

There tends to be much less high-quality, objective information about alternative methods than about mainstream treatments. This is one of the reasons that it is sometimes impossible to say much about whether an alternative method is likely to help you, or even how safe it might be. This is why you should try to learn as much as you can about each treatment before you use it. Even if some information isn't available, the limits of what is known can help you make your decision.

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

- Look for reliable, unbiased [sources of information](#) whenever possible. Some research has shown that one in three articles about cancer treatment on social media include incorrect or even harmful information.
- Learn about the risks and benefits of each therapy from reliable scientific sources.
- Talk with your doctor about your plans. Ask what is known about risks and benefits, and find out about possible interactions with mainstream treatments.
- Know for sure whether you are giving up proven treatment for an unproven one. (If you decide to do this, ask your doctor what options might still work for you if the alternative treatment doesn't.)
- Watch out for signs of fraud or misleading claims. Be aware that many of those offering alternative treatments have a vested financial interest in making them sound appealing.
- Keep in mind that most alternative 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 starting your child on an alternative treatment.

You can find more information about specific types of alternative medicine on the [National Cancer Institute](#)³ website.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine/complementary-and-alternative-methods-and-cancer.html
3. <http://cam.cancer.gov>

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Knecht K, Kinder D, Stockert A. Biologically-based complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use in cancer patients: The good, the bad, the misunderstood. *Front Nutr*. 2020 Jan 24;6:196.

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Where Can I Find Trustworthy Info on Alternative Medicine?

It can sometimes be hard to believe that alternative treatments we might hear about from family and friends have not been shown to work. There may be convincing stories of a person who was told they had cancer, then, after using this treatment, was cured and healthy again.

It's certainly understandable to want 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.

Why is it hard to find trustworthy information about alternative medicine?

Testing may not be required by law

Treatments that do not make claims to treat specific diseases or side effects may not have to go through scientific studies to show they are safe and effective. This is true for many [dietary supplements](#)¹. There are requirements about how dietary supplements must be made and labeled, but not requirements that they be tested to find out whether they actually help, or whether they are safe to use.

Some providers of alternative methods are careful to not make public claims about their effectiveness and safety. This allows them to avoid the testing that standard methods need to go through.

Some treatments are assumed to be safe

Some people choose alternative therapies because they think these treatments don't have harmful side effects. This is often not true. Some alternative therapies have been found to cause serious or even life-threatening side effects. Others have simply not been tested in rigorous [clinical trials](#)². But since most of these problems are not reported

to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), they are not studied.

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 be safe and work. However, just because a treatment method has been used a long time does not mean that it is safe and effective.

Many traditional therapies have not been studied thoroughly, as this type of research wasn't often done in the distant past. When scientific studies are not done, it can be hard to tell when an illness is truly helped by a treatment. Alternative 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.

Finally, keep in mind that many of the methods that were used in the distant past were simply the best option available at the time, because more effective treatments had not yet been developed.

The placebo 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**. The placebo effect means that if the person expects the treatment to help, they 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 ability to relieve pain or certain other symptoms for up to a few hours.

The placebo effect may explain one of the reasons that some people keep using certain types of alternative treatments that don't help the underlying disease. If they feel better for a few hours, it may be worth it to them. But the treatment may not have the same effect on everyone who tries it.

Finding reliable studies can be a challenge

Controlled human studies (clinical trials) are the best way to find out if a treatment works. Clinical trials to show that a treatment works must include large groups of people, compare new treatments to those 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, it is important to know whether a source can be trusted. It is best to look for studies published in reliable, mainstream medical journals. Be careful with articles shared through social media, as they often contain misleading or even harmful information. For more information about sources of treatment information, see [Evaluating New Cancer Treatments](#)³.

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

Some websites or journals might be set up just to promote certain types of treatment. They may offer pseudo-science – statements that look and sound scientific, but aren't. This can make it harder to learn about these treatments, since the information put out by these types of sources can make it sound like they work and have few or no side effects. And companies that offer products for sale may have “research” on their website that sounds good but was never reviewed by experts in the field. So, the results may not be trustworthy.

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.

Where can I find trustworthy information about alternative 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 alternative therapies*.

United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Toll-free number: 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332) Website: www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/default.htm⁴

- 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 supplements or other alternative methods to Medwatch at 1-800-FDA-1088 (1-800-332-1088) or visit www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch⁵

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Information Center Phone: 1-301-504-5414 Website: <https://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>⁶

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

National Cancer Institute (NCI) Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine Toll-free number: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) TTY: 1-800-332-8615
Website: www.cancer.gov⁷

- For complementary and alternative therapy information, visit:
<https://cam.cancer.gov/>

United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Toll-free number: 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357) Website: www.ftc.gov/curious⁸

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

National Council Against Health Fraud Website: www.ncahf.org⁹

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

Quackwatch Website: www.quackwatch.org¹⁰

- 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.*

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine/dietary-supplements.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/clinical-trials.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/how-to-interpret-news-about-new-cancer-treatments.html

4. <http://www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/default.htm>
5. <http://www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch>
6. www.nal.usda.gov/fnic
7. <http://www.cancer.gov/>
8. <http://www.ftc.gov/curious>
9. <http://www.ncahf.org/>
10. <http://www.quackwatch.org/>

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Can I Safely Use an Alternative Method?

If you are thinking about using an alternative method instead of standard treatment, be sure to talk to your doctor first. It can be a challenge to find [trustworthy information](#) about the safety and effectiveness of alternative treatments. Also, some of these treatments can require a lot of time and money, and they may require travel away from your family and friends.

Choosing alternative treatment instead of mainstream cancer treatments might put you at serious risk. Delays or interruptions in standard treatment can give the cancer more time to grow. Even early stage cancers can become hard to treat successfully if proven treatment is delayed long enough. And even if your cancer has reached a stage where a cure might not be possible, it's important to know that standard care can often still offer a lot in terms of helping to control the cancer and keep you comfortable.

Questions to ask about an alternative method

If you are thinking about using an alternative method instead of standard treatment, learn as much as you can about it. Ask these questions:

- **What claims are made about the treatment?** Be very suspicious of any treatment that says it can cure any cancer. Claims that a treatment can cure all cancers or that it can cure cancer and other difficult-to-treat diseases are sure to be false.
- **What are the qualifications of the people offering the treatment?** Are they medical doctors? Are they recognized experts in cancer care? If you're seeing an alternative practitioner, find out about their training and education.
- **Have scientific studies been done in humans to find out if this treatment is safe and if it works?** What side effects have been reported?
- **Have the findings been published in journals that have scientists who are**

experts in the same field review them?

- **How is information about the method given?** Is it promoted only in the mass media, such as books, magazines, online, social media, TV, infomercials, and radio talk shows, rather than in scientific or medical journals?
- **Is the method widely available for use within the cancer-care community?** Once a treatment is found to be safe and helpful, it's usually widely adopted by health professionals. Beware of treatments you can only get in one clinic, especially if that clinic is in a country with fewer patient protection laws than 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

It's important to remember that most alternative treatments are considered to be unproven, because they have not been studied enough to show they are safe and effective against cancer. Some alternative treatments may be considered disproven, because studies that have been done haven't shown them to be effective. If those treatments continue to be marketed to people with cancer, concerns about quackery and fraud are raised.

Quackery refers to the promotion of unproven or disproven methods that claim to prevent, diagnose, or cure cancer. 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 (anecdotes) as evidence of their effectiveness and safety. Many times, the treatment is claimed to cure other diseases as well.

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.

Some of the practitioners and companies that offer alternative treatments know that they're operating illegally. Some will put drugs into an "all natural" supplement or use treatments that are not tested. Some might offer treatments from countries where regulations are less strict than in the United States. Some who practice in the US and run into legal issues might simply move to another part of the country to offer their treatments again, sometimes under a different company name.

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 without having any 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 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?

Before investing your time and money in any alternative medicine, please talk to your doctor about whether or not it may help you.

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Will My Insurance Cover Alternative Medicine?

Some insurance companies may pay for some of the more well know alternative methods, such as homeopathy and naturopathy. If you are looking into alternative treatments, 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 alternative 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 alternative 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?

Insurance companies usually will not cover alternative methods that have not been shown to be helpful for the illness or symptom you have. To be covered by insurance, a treatment must be shown to be safe, effective, and necessary for a certain condition.

Also note that your chosen alternative provider may not accept insurance. You may be required to pay out of pocket and submit requests for reimbursement to your insurance provider yourself.

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How Do I Talk to My Doctor About Alternative Medicine?

Many people with cancer are afraid to discuss alternative treatments with their cancer care team. It's true that many health care providers may not know about the uses, risks, and potential benefits of alternative treatments. 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.
- 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 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 the doctor's office 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.

- Don't delay or skip regular treatment without letting your cancer care team know. If you're thinking about stopping or not taking mainstream treatment, talk to your doctor about this. Even though you may be choosing not to use proven treatments 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 standard supportive treatments that can help you feel better.
- If you're taking [dietary supplements](#)¹, 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 risks and effects of alternative methods.
- Never give herbal medicines to children without talking to their doctors first.
- Ask your doctor to help you identify possible [fraud and questionable treatments](#).

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine/dietary-supplements.html

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