

Are You Considering Complementary Medicine?



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Millions of Americans use some form of complementary medicine. Like any decision concerning your health, decisions about whether to use complementary therapies are important. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has developed this fact sheet to assist you in your decisionmaking about complementary practices and products.

Key Points

- Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. Find out and consider what scientific studies have been done on the safety and effectiveness of the complementary product or practice that interests you. Discuss the information with your health care provider before making a decision.
- If you are considering a therapy provided by a complementary medicine practitioner, such as acupuncture, choose the practitioner as carefully as you would choose a conventional health care provider.
- If you are considering a dietary supplement, such as an herbal product, find out about any potential side effects or interactions with medications you may be taking.
- Complementary products or practices that have not been proven safe and effective should never be used as a replacement for conventional medical treatment or as a reason to postpone seeing a health care provider about any health problem.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary approaches you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

National Center for Complementary
and Alternative Medicine



NCCAM

What Do “Complementary,” “Integrative,” and “Alternative” Mean?

The term **complementary medicine** refers to a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered to be part of conventional medicine. Complementary medicine includes natural products, such as dietary supplements, herbs, and probiotics, as well as mind and body practices, such as meditation, chiropractic, acupuncture, and massage.

Another term often used in discussions of therapies that are not part of conventional medicine is **integrative medicine**. Integrative medicine combines conventional and complementary approaches in a coordinated way.

A third term, **alternative medicine**, refers to the use of approaches that are not part of conventional medicine as replacements for, rather than complements to, conventional treatment. NCCAM advises against using any product or practice that has not been proven safe and effective as a substitute for conventional medical treatment or as a reason to postpone seeing a doctor about any health problem. In some instances, stopping—or not starting—conventional treatment can have serious consequences. Before making a decision not to use a proven conventional treatment, talk to your health care providers.

How can I get reliable information about a complementary therapy?

It is important to learn what scientific studies have discovered about the therapy you are considering. Making a decision based on the facts is a better idea than using a therapy simply because of something you have seen in an advertisement or on a Web site or because someone has told you that it worked for them. (For tips on how to evaluate Web site information, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Evaluating Web-Based Health Resources* at nccam.nih.gov/health/webresources/.)

Understanding a therapy’s potential benefits, risks, and scientific evidence is critical to your health and safety. Scientific research on many complementary therapies is relatively new, so this kind of information may not be available for every therapy. However, many studies are under way, including those that NCCAM supports, and knowledge and understanding of complementary therapies are increasing all the time. Here are some ways to find reliable information:

- **Talk with your health care providers.** Tell them about the product or practice you are considering and ask any questions you may have about safety, effectiveness, or interactions with medications (prescription or nonprescription) or dietary supplements.
- **Visit the NCCAM Web site (nccam.nih.gov).** The “Health Information” page has information on specific complementary therapies and links to other online sources of information. The Web site also has contact information for the **NCCAM Clearinghouse**, where information specialists are available to assist you in searching the scientific literature and to suggest useful NCCAM publications. You can also find information from NCCAM on Facebook (www.facebook.com/nccam), Twitter (twitter.com/NCCAM), and YouTube (www.youtube.com/NCCAMgov).
- **Visit your local library or a medical library.** Ask the reference librarian to help you find scientific journals and trustworthy books with information on the therapy that interests you.

About Scientific Evidence on Complementary Medicine

Scientific evidence on complementary medicine includes results from laboratory research (e.g., animal studies) as well as clinical trials (studies in people). It encompasses both “positive” findings (evidence that an approach may work) and “negative” findings (evidence that it probably does not work or that it may be unsafe). Scientific journals publish study results as well as review articles that evaluate the evidence as it accumulates. NCCAM fact sheets on specific health conditions or complementary approaches base information about research findings primarily on the most rigorous review articles, known as systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Authors of such reviews often conclude that more research and/or better designed studies are needed.

Are complementary therapies safe? How can I minimize risks in using these therapies?

As with any medical product or treatment, there can be risks with complementary therapies. These risks depend on the specific therapy. Each therapy needs to be considered on its own. However, if you are considering a specific therapy, the following general suggestions can help you think about safety and minimize risks.

- Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. Find out what the scientific evidence is about any therapy’s safety and whether it works.
- Be aware that individuals respond differently to treatments, whether conventional or complementary. How a person might respond to a therapy depends on many things, including the person’s state of health, how the therapy is used, or the person’s belief in the therapy.
- Keep in mind that “natural” does not necessarily mean “safe.” (Think of mushrooms that grow in the wild: some are safe to eat, while others are not.)
- Learn about factors that affect safety. For a therapy that is administered by a practitioner, these factors include the training, skill, and experience of the practitioner. For a product such as a dietary supplement, the specific ingredients and the quality of the manufacturing process are important factors.
- If you decide to use a therapy that would be given by a complementary medicine practitioner, such as naturopathy or acupuncture, choose the practitioner carefully. (To learn more, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Selecting a CAM Practitioner* at nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/practitioner.htm.)

- If you decide to use a dietary supplement, such as an herbal product, be aware that some products may interact with medications (prescription or over-the-counter) or other dietary supplements, and some may have side effects on their own. (To learn more, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely* at nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiseuse.htm.)
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary and alternative approaches you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about complementary and alternative medicine, see NCCAM's Time to talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

How can I determine whether statements made about the effectiveness of a complementary therapy are true?

Statements that manufacturers and providers of complementary therapies may make about effectiveness and benefits can sound reasonable and promising. However, the statements may not be based on scientific evidence. Before you begin using a complementary therapy, it is a good idea to ask the following questions:

- Is there scientific evidence (not just personal stories) to back up the statements?
- Does the Federal Government have anything to report about the therapy?
 - Visit the NCCAM Web site or contact the NCCAM Clearinghouse to see if NCCAM has information about the therapy.
 - Visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) online at www.fda.gov/ to see if there is any information available about the product or practice.
 - Information specifically about dietary supplements can be found on the FDA's Web site at www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/ and on the Web site of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Dietary Supplements at ods.od.nih.gov/.
 - Visit the FDA's Web page on recalls and safety alerts at www.fda.gov/Safety/Recalls/. The FDA has a rapid public notification system to provide information about tainted dietary supplements. See www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/ContactFDA/StayInformed/RSSFeeds/TDS/rss.xml.
 - Check with the Federal Trade Commission at www.ftc.gov/ to see if there are any enforcement actions for deceptive advertising regarding the therapy. Also, visit the site's Health Consumer Information section at www.ftc.gov/bcp/menus/consumer/health.shtm.
- How does the provider or manufacturer describe the therapy?
 - Question terms like "scientific breakthrough," "miracle cure," "secret ingredient," or "ancient remedy."
 - If you encounter claims of a "quick fix" that depart from previous research, keep in mind that science usually advances over time by small steps, slowly building an evidence base.
 - Remember: if it sounds too good to be true—for example, claims that a therapy can cure a disease or works for a variety of ailments—it usually is.

Are complementary therapies tested to see if they work?

While scientific evidence exists regarding the effectiveness and safety of some complementary therapies, for most there are key questions that are yet to be answered through well-designed scientific studies—questions such as whether the therapies are safe, whether they work for the diseases or medical conditions for which they are used, and how those therapies with health benefits may work. As the Federal Government’s lead agency for scientific research on the diverse complementary medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine, NCCAM supports studies to answer these questions and determine who might benefit most from the use of specific therapies.

I am interested in a therapy that involves treatment from a complementary medicine practitioner. How do I go about selecting a practitioner?

Your primary health care provider or local hospital may be able to recommend a complementary medicine practitioner. The professional organization for the type of practitioner you are seeking may have helpful information, such as licensing and training requirements. Many states have regulatory agencies or licensing boards for certain types of complementary medicine practitioners; they may be able to help you locate practitioners in your area. For more suggestions, see the NCCAM fact sheets *Selecting a CAM Practitioner* at nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/practitioner.htm and *Credentialing CAM Providers: Understanding CAM Education, Training, Regulation, and Licensing* at nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/credentialing.htm.

Can I receive treatment or a referral to a complementary medicine practitioner from NCCAM?

NCCAM does not provide treatment or referrals to complementary medicine practitioners. NCCAM’s mission is to define, through rigorous scientific investigation, the usefulness and safety of complementary and alternative medicine interventions and their roles in improving health and health care.

Can I participate in a clinical trial of a complementary therapy?

NCCAM supports clinical trials on complementary therapies. These trials are taking place in many locations, and study participants are needed. To learn more, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Clinical Trials and CAM* at nccam.nih.gov/research/clinicaltrials/factsheet/. To find trials that are recruiting participants, go to the Web site nccam.nih.gov/research/clinicaltrials/alltrials.htm. You can search this site by type of therapy or by disease or condition. If you do not have access to the Internet, contact the NCCAM Clearinghouse for information.

For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

The NCCAM Clearinghouse provides information on NCCAM and complementary medicine, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: nccam.nih.gov

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), NIH

ODS seeks to strengthen knowledge and understanding of dietary supplements by evaluating scientific information, supporting research, sharing research results, and educating the public. Its resources include publications (such as *Dietary Supplements: What You Need to Know*), fact sheets on a variety of specific supplement ingredients (such as vitamin D and black cohosh), and the PubMed Dietary Supplement Subset.

Web site: ods.od.nih.gov/

E-mail: ods@nih.gov

NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus

To provide resources that help answer health questions, MedlinePlus brings together authoritative information from the National Institutes of Health as well as other Government agencies and health-related organizations.

Web site: www.medlineplus.gov/

Information on complementary medicine:

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/complementaryandalternativemedicine.html

PubMed®

A service of the National Library of Medicine, PubMed contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals.

Web site: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

The FDA oversees the safety of many products, such as foods, medicines, dietary supplements, medical devices, and cosmetics.

Web site: www.fda.gov/

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-463-6332

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

The FTC is the Federal agency charged with protecting the public against unfair and deceptive business practices. A key area of its work is the regulation of advertising (except for prescription drugs and medical devices).

Web site: www.ftc.gov/

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-877-382-4357

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