

# Thinking About Complementary & Alternative Medicine



A guide  
for  
people  
with  
cancer



**PATIENT  
& family  
EDUCATION**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
National Institutes of Health  
National Cancer Institute  
National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

## Contents

Reasons People With Cancer Choose CAM .....	1
Making Choices .....	1
What Is Complementary and Alternative Medicine?....	2
Types of Complementary and Alternative Medicine ....	3
Talk With Your Doctor Before You Use CAM .....	6
A “Natural” Product Does Not Mean a Safe Product ...	8
Choose Practitioners With Care.....	9
Getting Information From Trusted Sources .....	12
Resources .....	16

## Many Choices

You have many choices to make before, during, and after your cancer treatment.

One choice you may be thinking about is complementary and alternative medicine. We call this CAM, for short.

## Reasons People With Cancer Choose CAM

People with cancer may use CAM to:

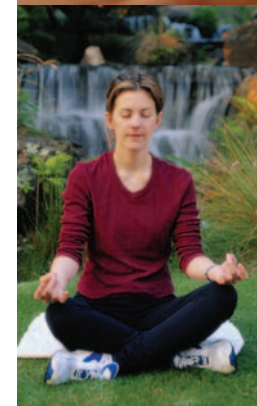
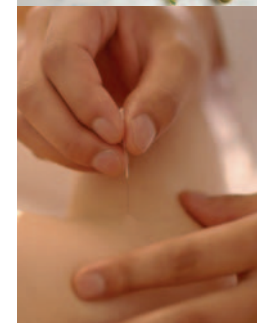
- Help cope with the side effects of cancer treatments, such as nausea, pain, and fatigue;
- Comfort themselves and ease the worries of cancer treatment and related stress;
- Feel that they are doing something more to help with their own care;
- Try to treat or cure their cancer.

## Making Choices

It's natural to want to fight your cancer in any way you can. There is a lot of information available, and new methods for treating cancer are always being tested, so it may be hard to know where to start.

This brochure may help you understand what you find and make it easier to decide whether CAM is right for you. Many people try CAM therapies during cancer care. CAM does not work for everyone, but some methods may help you manage stress, nausea, pain, or other symptoms or side effects.

The most important message of this brochure is to talk to your doctor before you try anything new. This will help ensure that nothing gets in the way of your cancer treatment.



## What Is Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)?

CAM is any medical system, practice, or product that is not thought of as standard care. Standard medical care is care that is based on scientific evidence. For cancer, it includes chemotherapy, radiation, biological therapy, and surgery.

### Complementary Medicine

- Complementary medicine is used **along with** standard medical treatments.
- One example is using acupuncture to help with side effects of cancer treatment.

### Alternative Medicine

- Alternative medicine is used **in place of** standard medical treatments.
- One example is using a special diet to treat cancer instead of a method that a cancer specialist (an oncologist) suggests.

### Integrative Medicine

- Integrative medicine **is a total approach to care** that involves the patient's mind, body, and spirit. It combines standard medicine with the CAM practices that have shown the most promise.
- For example, some people learn to use relaxation as a way to reduce stress during chemotherapy.



## Types of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)

We are learning about CAM therapies every day, but there is still more to learn. Consumers may use the terms “natural,” “holistic,” “home remedy,” or “Eastern medicine” to refer to CAM. However, experts use five categories to describe it. These are listed below with a few examples for each. **(For a complete list of therapies, go to <http://nccam.nih.gov/health>.)**

### Mind-Body Medicines

These are based on the belief that your mind is able to affect your body. Some examples are:

- **Meditation:** Focused breathing or repetition of words or phrases to quiet the mind;
- **Biofeedback:** Using simple machines, the patient learns how to affect certain body functions that are normally out of one's awareness (such as heart rate);
- **Hypnosis:** A state of relaxed and focused attention in which the patient concentrates on a certain feeling, idea, or suggestion to aid in healing;

- **Yoga:** Systems of stretches and poses, with special attention given to breathing;
- **Imagery:** Imagining scenes, pictures, or experiences to help the body heal;
- **Creative outlets:** Such as art, music, or dance.

## Biologically Based Practices

This type of CAM uses things found in nature. This includes dietary supplements and herbal products. Some examples are:

- Vitamins
- Foods
- Herbs
- Special diets

**A note about nutrition:** It's common for people with cancer to have questions about different foods to eat during treatment. Yet it's important to know that there is no one food or special diet that has been proven to control cancer. Too much of any one food is not helpful, and may even be harmful. Because of nutrition needs you may have, it's best to talk with the doctor in charge of your treatment about the foods you should be eating.

## Manipulative and Body-Based Practices

These are based on working with one or more parts of the body. Some examples are:

- **Massage:** Manipulation of tissues with hands or special tools;
- **Chiropractic care** (ky-ro-PRAK-tik): A type of manipulation of the joints and skeletal system;

- **Reflexology** (ree-flex-AH-lo-gee): Using pressure points in the hands or feet to affect other parts of the body.

## Energy Medicine

Energy medicine involves the belief that the body has energy fields that can be used for healing and wellness. Therapists use pressure or move the body by placing their hands in or through these fields. Some examples are:

- **Tai Chi** (ty-CHEE): Involves slow, gentle movements with a focus on the breath and concentration;
- **Reiki** (RAY-kee): Balancing energy either from a distance or by placing hands on or near the patient;
- **Therapeutic touch** (thair-a-PYU-tik): Moving hands over energy fields of the body.





## Whole Medical Systems

These are healing systems and beliefs that have evolved over time in different cultures and parts of the world. Some examples are:

- **Ayurvedic medicine** (eye-yer-VAY-dik): A system from India emphasizing balance among body, mind, and spirit;
- **Chinese medicine:** Based on the view that health is a balance in the body of two forces called *yin and yang*. **Acupuncture** (AK-yoo-PUNK-cher) is a common practice in Chinese medicine that involves stimulating specific points on the body to promote health, or to lessen disease symptoms and treatment side effects;
- **Homeopathy** (home-ee-AH-puh-thee): Uses very small doses of substances to trigger the body to heal itself;
- **Naturopathic medicine** (na-chur-o-PATH-ik): Uses different methods that help the body naturally heal itself.

## Talk With Your Doctor Before You Use CAM

Some people with cancer are afraid that their doctor won't understand or approve of the use of CAM. But doctors know that people with cancer want to take an active part in their care. They want the best for their patients and often are willing to work with them.

Talk to your doctor to make sure that all aspects of your cancer care work together. This is important because things that seem safe, such as certain foods or pills, may interfere with your cancer treatment.



## What questions should I ask my doctor about CAM?

### What types of CAM might:

- Help me cope, reduce my stress, and feel better?
- Help me feel less tired?
- Help me deal with cancer symptoms, such as pain, or side effects of treatment, such as nausea?

### If I decide to try a CAM therapy:

- Will it interfere with my treatment or medicines?
- Can you help me understand these articles I found about CAM?
- Can you suggest a CAM practitioner for me to talk to?
- Will you work with my CAM practitioner?

## A “Natural” Product Does Not Mean a Safe Product

Here are some important facts about dietary supplements such as herbs and vitamins:

- **They may affect how well other medicines work in your body.**

Herbs and some plant-based products may keep medicines from doing what they are supposed to do. These medicines can be ones your doctor prescribes for you, or even ones you buy off the shelf at the store.

For example, the herb St. John’s wort, which some people with cancer use for depression, may cause certain anticancer drugs not to work as well as they should.

- **Herbal supplements can act like drugs in your body.**

They may be harmful when taken by themselves, with other substances, or in large doses. For example, some studies have shown that kava, an herb that has been used to help with stress and anxiety, may cause liver damage.

- **Vitamins can also take strong action in your body.**

For example, high doses of vitamins, even vitamin C, may affect how chemotherapy and radiation work. Too much of any vitamin is not safe—even in a healthy person.



Tell your doctor if you are taking any dietary supplements, no matter how safe you think they are. This is very important. Even though there are ads or claims that something has been used for years, they do not prove that it is safe or effective. It is still important to be careful.

Supplements do not have to be approved by the Federal Government before being sold to the public. Also, a prescription is not needed to buy them. Therefore, it’s up to consumers to decide what is best for them.

## Choose Practitioners With Care

CAM practitioners are people who have training in the therapies listed on pages 2–6. Choosing one should be done with the same care as choosing a doctor. Here are some things to remember when choosing a practitioner:

- Ask your doctor or nurse to suggest someone or speak with someone who knows about CAM.
- Ask whether someone at your cancer center or doctor’s office can help you find a CAM practitioner. There may be a social worker or physical therapist who can help you.
- Ask whether your hospital keeps lists of centers or has staff who can suggest people.
- Contact CAM professional organizations to get names of practitioners who are certified. This means that they have proper training in their field. (See page 16 for resources.)

- Contact local health and wellness organizations.
- Ask about each practitioner's training and experience.
- Ask whether the practitioner has a license to practice in your state. If you want to confirm the answer, ask what organization gives out the licenses. Then, you may choose to follow up with a phone call.
- Call your health care plan to see if it covers this therapy.

### What general questions should I ask the CAM practitioner?

- What types of CAM do you practice?
- What are your training and qualifications?
- Do you see other patients with my type of cancer?
- Will you work with my doctor?



### What questions about the therapy should I ask the CAM practitioner?

- How can this help me?
- Do you know of studies that prove it helps?
- What are the risks and side effects?
- Will this interfere with my cancer treatment?
- How long will I be on the therapy?
- What will it cost?
- Do you have information that I can read about it?
- Are there any reasons why I should not use it?

### Other Questions To Ask Yourself

- Do I feel comfortable with this person?
- Do I like how the office looks and feels?
- Do I like the staff?
- Does this person support standard cancer treatments?
- How far am I willing to travel for treatment?
- Is it easy to get an appointment?
- Are the hours good for me?
- Will insurance cover the cost of CAM?  
Call your health plan or insurer to see whether they cover CAM therapies. Many are not covered.

## Getting Information From Trusted Sources

### Government Agencies

There is a lot of information on CAM, so it's important to go to sources you can trust. Good places to start are the government agencies listed in the back of this booklet. They offer lots of information about CAM that might be helpful to you. They may also know of universities or hospitals that have CAM resources.

Be careful of products advertised by people or companies that:

- Make claims that they have a “cure”;
- Do not give specific information about how well their product works;
- Make claims only about positive results that have few side effects;
- Say they have clinical studies, but provide no proof or copies of the studies.

Just remember, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. For ways to find out more about CAM, see the resources section on page 16.

### Web Sites

Patients and families have been able to find answers to many of their questions about CAM on the Internet. Many Web sites are good resources for CAM information. However, some may be unreliable or misleading.

Questions to ask about a Web site:

- Who runs and pays for the site?
- Does it list any credentials?
- Does it represent an organization that is well-known and respected?
- What is the purpose of the site, and who is it for?
- Is the site selling or promoting something?
- Where does the information come from?
- Is the information based on facts or only on someone's feelings or opinions?
- How is the information chosen? Is there a review board or is the content reviewed by experts?
- How current is the information?
- Does the site tell when it was last updated?
- How does the site choose which other sites to link you to?

**For more details, see the fact sheet “How to Evaluate Health Information on the Internet: Questions and Answers” at <http://cancer.gov>, search term “internet.”**





## Books

A number of books have been written about different CAM therapies. Some books are better than others and contain trustworthy content, while others do not.

If you go to the library, ask the staff for suggestions. Or if you live near a college or university, there may be a medical library available. Local bookstores may also have people on staff who can help you.

It's important to know that information is always changing and that new research results are reported every day. Be aware that if a book is written by only one person, you may only be getting that one person's view.

Questions to ask:

- Is the author an expert on this subject?
- Do you know anyone else who has read the book?
- Has the book been reviewed by other experts?



- Was it published in the past 5 years?
- Does the book offer different points of view, or does it seem to hold one opinion?
- Has the author researched the topic in full?
- Are the references listed in the back?

## Magazine Articles

If you want to look for articles you can trust, ask your librarian to help you look for medical journals, books, and other research that has been done by experts.

Articles in popular magazines are usually not written by experts. Rather, the authors speak with experts, gather information, and then write the article. If claims about CAM are made in magazine articles, remember:

- The authors may not have expert knowledge in this area;
- They may not say where they found their information;
- The articles have not been reviewed by experts;
- The publisher may have ties to advertisers or other organizations. Therefore, the article may be one-sided.

When you read these articles, you can use the same process that the magazine writer uses:

- Speak with experts;
- Ask lots of questions;
- Then decide if the therapy is right for you.

## Resources

### National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)

- Funds CAM research
- Evaluates and provides information about CAM to health providers and the public.

Visit: <http://nccam.nih.gov>

Toll-free: **1-888-644-6226**

TTY: **1-866-464-3615**



### National Cancer Institute (NCI)

#### Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine (OCCAM)

- Oversees NCI's projects in CAM
- Funds cancer CAM research
- Provides information about CAM to health providers and the public.

Visit: <http://cancer.gov/cam>

#### Cancer Information Service (CIS)

- Provides help finding NCI information on the Internet
- Answers questions about cancer
- Provides printed materials from NCI
- Gives referrals to clinical trials and other cancer-related services.

Visit: <http://cis.nci.nih.gov>

Chat online: <http://www.cancer.gov>

*Click on "Need Help?," then click on "Live Help."*

Toll-free: **1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)**

TTY: **1-800-332-8615**

## PDQ®

- Provides regularly updated information on most types of cancer and many related topics.

Visit: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq>

## National Library of Medicine

- The Directory of Information Resources Online (**DIRLINE**) contains locations of and information about a number of health organizations, including those that focus on CAM.

Visit: <http://dirline.nlm.nih.gov>

- **Medline Plus** provides access to reliable health information, including articles, organizations, directories, and answers to health questions.

Visit: <http://medlineplus.gov>

- **PubMed** has a free and easy-to-use search tool for finding scientific articles on CAM.

Visit: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed>

## Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

- Oversees safety of drugs and medical devices
- Provides information on many issues, including vitamins and pills
- Informs people about how to look for health fraud.

Visit: <http://www.fda.gov>

Toll-free: **1-888-463-6332**

## Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

- Provides information about consumer protection laws
- Provides information about false advertising for foods and drugs.

Visit: <http://www.ftc.gov>

Toll-free: **1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357)**

TTY: **1-866-653-4261**

## National Cancer Institute-Sponsored Cancer Centers

- Many National Cancer Institute-sponsored cancer centers have CAM information available to you.

Visit: <http://www3.cancer.gov/cancercenters/centerslist.html>

Toll-free: **1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)**

*Ask for the cancer center list fact sheet.*

## Notes & Questions





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NIH Publication No. 04-5541

April 2005

