

CHOOSING A PRACTITIONER

Ask your health care provider whether he or she has recommendations for the type of complementary and alternative medicine practitioner you are seeking.

Contact a nearby hospital or a medical school. Some regional medical centers may have a complementary and alternative medicine center or the practitioners on staff.

Make a list of practitioners and gather information about each before making your first visit. Ask basic questions about their credentials and practice. Where did they receive their training? What licenses or certifications do they have? How much will the treatment cost?

After you select a practitioner, make a list of questions to ask at your first visit. You may want to bring a friend or family member who can help you ask questions and note answers. You want a practitioner who is easy to talk to and who is willing to answer your questions.

What About Cost?

Many complementary and alternative therapies may be expensive and often are not covered by insurance. Health insurance companies are more likely to cover more "accepted" alternative therapies, such as chiropractic care or osteopathy.

Some insurance companies are even starting to cover additional therapies, such as acupuncture or massage, and may have enrolled alternative practitioners as providers on their plans. Call your health insurance provider to find out what your plan covers.



Keep Your Health Care Provider in the Loop

The real danger in complementary and alternative medicine is keeping the fact that you're using it a secret from your health care provider. You may think that conventional physicians frown upon complementary and alternative medicine, but in fact, as many as half of U.S. physicians refer patients to complementary and alternative medicine practitioners.

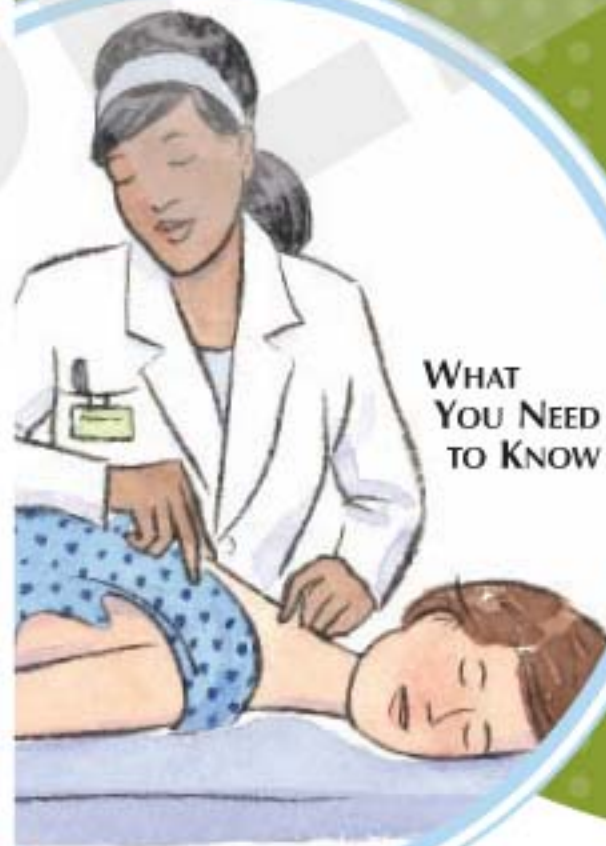
BE SAFE: Some complementary and alternative treatments are unproven or can even be unsafe — as in herbal supplements, which are not subject to FDA scrutiny, or ayurvedic medicines that may contain toxic levels of some substances. So before using a unconventional treatment, talk with your health care provider to find out if it's right for you. And if you're already using complementary and alternative medicine, be sure to discuss it with your provider.

Knowing about all the therapies that you use, both conventional and alternative, will allow your health care provider to care for you in the best way possible. Therapies can interact with one another (herbs and nutritional supplements with prescription drugs, for example). Your provider can help you prevent problems but only if he or she knows what you are taking.

Final thought: Always weigh the risks and benefits of any treatment, but don't do it alone.



COMPLEMENTARY & ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

EXPLORING TREATMENTS

Acupuncture. Herbal supplements. Chiropractic.

Over the years, complementary and alternative medicine has grown in popularity. The downside to this health care "revolution" is that many people who use complementary and alternative medicine don't discuss the therapies they are using with their doctors.

Maybe you've tried complementary and alternative medicine, or maybe you're thinking about it. A lot of information is out there in magazines, newspapers and on the Internet. But the information can be contradictory, confusing and in the worst cases, harmful. It pays to be an informed consumer, and it's especially important to include your health care provider in the process. The information in this brochure can help.



Complementary & Alternative Medicine Defined

Complementary and alternative medicine is defined as practices that aren't integral parts of conventional medicine.

Complementary medicine generally refers to treatments that work with conventional methods, such as therapeutic massage paired with prescription pain relief. Alternative medicine usually comprises those practices used instead of conventional medicine.

Some hospitals offer services for complementary and alternative medicine, which are called Integrative Medicine, and many insurance companies offer coverage for selected types.

What Is Homeopathy?

Homeopaths prescribe highly diluted doses of substances that actually cause a condition's symptoms — leading to the homeopathic philosophy, "like cures like." A homeopath might consider your entire constitution as well as your symptoms when treating you.

AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMON THERAPIES

Complementary and alternative medicine encompasses many different kinds of therapy and many healing systems, some of which have been in practice for centuries. Some are fairly compatible with conventional medicine and are becoming more mainstream, while others are still far outside the Western practice of medicine. **There are many options, including:**



Whole medical systems, such as homeopathic medicine and naturopathic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, and Ayurveda — traditional Indian medicine that focuses on the body, mind and spirit.

Mind-body interventions, designed to enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms. Examples include yoga, biofeedback, visual imagery, hypnosis and even meditation and creative outlets such as art, music or dance.

Biologically based treatments, using substances found in nature, such as herbs, foods, and vitamins. Examples include dietary supplements, herbal products and the use of other so-called natural but as yet scientifically unproven therapies (for example, using shark cartilage to treat cancer)

Manipulative and body-based therapies, including chiropractic, massage and osteopathy, which focus on the musculoskeletal system

Energy therapies such as acupuncture and Reiki, which is a Japanese technique that transfers healing energy from one person to another.



What Is the Placebo Effect?

Researchers have long noted that if a person believes strongly enough that a treatment will work, he or she will feel better — even if the therapy had no physical effect. This is called the placebo effect. There has been some debate over whether some complementary and alternative therapies actually "work," or if their perceived value is just the placebo effect in action. The placebo effect has value in itself — after all, it can cause your symptoms to go away and help you feel better — another testament to the power of mind over body.

IS IT SAFE?

Before you try any complementary and alternative medicine therapy, find out as much information as possible. **Focus on:**

- Risks and effectiveness
- Recent studies, findings and articles
- Any information from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Trade Commission

More Tips

- If the therapy is touted as "innovation," "quick cure," "miracle cure," "exclusive product," "new discovery" or "secret formula" — beware of such claims and claims that a therapy is a cure for a wide range of unrelated diseases.

- Contact a professional association for the type of therapy you're considering. Professional organizations often have standards of practice, provide referrals and offer informational materials. **Resource:** Directory of Information Resources Online (DIRLINE) compiled by the National Library of Medicine, dirline.nlm.nih.gov.

- Find information about the safety and effectiveness of therapies at the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine online, nccam.nih.gov.

