

Cancer and Alternative and Complimentary Medicine

National Center For Complimentary and Alternative Medicine

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Topics Covered:

What is complementary and alternative medicine?

Is Complementary and alternative medicine widely used?

How are complementary and alternative medicine approaches evaluated?

What should patients do when using or considering complementary and alternative medicine therapies?

When considering complementary and alternative medicine, what questions should patients ask their health care providers?

References

Key Points

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not part of conventional medicine.

The same scientific evaluation that is used to assess conventional cancer treatments should be used to assess complementary and alternative medicine therapies.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is sponsoring a number of clinical trials (research studies in people) to study CAM therapies for cancer.

To ensure a safe and coordinated course of care, people with cancer should inform their health care

providers about any complementary and alternative medicine therapy that they are currently using or considering.

1. What is complementary and alternative medicine?

Complementary and alternative medicine is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not part of conventional (standard) medicine. Conventional medicine is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) or D.O. (doctor of osteopathy) degrees and by their allied health professionals, such as nurses, physical therapists, and dietitians.

Complementary medicine is used *along with* conventional medicine.

Alternative medicine is used *instead of* conventional medicine.

Integrative medicine combines standard medicine with complementary and alternative medicine practices that have been shown to be effective.

This fact sheet answers some frequently asked questions about the use of complementary and alternative medicine therapies and the way that CAM approaches are evaluated, and suggests resources for further information.

2. Is complimentary and alternative medicine widely used?

According to the most recent comprehensive survey on Americans' use of complementary and alternative medicine 36 percent of U.S. adults are using some form.. When megavitamin therapy and prayer for health reasons are included in the definition of complementary and alternative medicine, that percentage rises to 62 percent. These results are based on the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, which was supported by NCCAM and the National Center for Health Statistics (part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The survey found that rates of CAM use are especially high among patients with serious illnesses such as cancer.

Several smaller studies of complementary and alternative medicine use by cancer patients have been conducted. A study of complementary and alternative medicine cancer patients in the July 2000 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* found that 69 percent of 453 cancer patients had used at least one complementary and alternative cancer therapy as part of their cancer treatment. A study published in the December 2004 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* reported that 88 percent of 102 people with cancer who were enrolled in phase I clinical trials (research studies in people) at the Mayo Comprehensive Cancer Center had used at least one CAM therapy. Of those, 93 percent had used supplements (such as vitamins or minerals), 53 percent had used nonsupplement forms of CAM (such as

prayer/spiritual practices or chiropractic care), and almost 47 percent had used both.

A review article in the March 2005 issue of the *Southern Medical Journal* reported that cancer patients take supplements to reduce side effects and organ toxicity, to protect and stimulate their immune systems, or to prevent further cancers or recurrences. Patients frequently see using supplements as a way to take control over their health and increase their quality of life.

Additional information about complementary and alternative cancer treatment patients can be found in a review article published in *Seminars in Oncology* in December 2002.

3. How are Complimentary and Alternative medicine approaches evaluated?

The same rigorous scientific evaluation used to assess conventional cancer treatments should be used for complementary and alternative cancer treatments. NCCAM is funding a number of clinical trials to evaluate complementary and alternative medicine cancer treatments.

Conventional cancer treatments are studied for safety and effectiveness through a rigorous scientific process that includes laboratory research and clinical trials with large numbers of patients. Less is known about the safety and effectiveness of complementary and alternative methods to treat cancer, although some CAM therapies have undergone rigorous evaluation.

A small number of CAM therapies, which were originally considered to be purely alternative approaches, are finding a place in cancer treatment--not as cures, but as complementary therapies that may help patients feel better and recover faster. One example is acupuncture. In 1997, a panel of experts at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Consensus Conference found acupuncture to be effective in managing chemotherapy-associated nausea and vomiting and in controlling pain associated with surgery. In contrast, some approaches, such as the use of laetrile, have been studied and found ineffective or potentially harmful.

4. Is NCCAM sponsoring clinical trials on Complimentary and Alternative treatments for cancer?

NCCAM is sponsoring a number of clinical trials to study complementary and alternative treatments for cancer. Some of these trials study the effects of complementary approaches used in addition to conventional treatments, while others compare alternative therapies with conventional treatments. Recent trials include the following:

Acupuncture to relieve neck and shoulder pain following surgery for head or neck cancer

Ginger as a treatment for nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy

Massage for the treatment of cancer pain

Mistletoe extract combined with chemotherapy for the treatment of solid tumors

Patients who are interested in taking part in these or any other clinical trials should talk with their health care provider.

Patients, family members, and health professionals can use the following Web resources to find out about CAM clinical trials:

The NCCAM Clinical Trials Web page. Describes current clinical trials for cancer and other health conditions. Information on clinical trials is also available through the NCCAM Clearinghouse.

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) PDQ Clinical Trials Database. Includes studies of conventional and complementary and alternative cancer treatments. This information is also available through NCI's Cancer Information Service.

5. What should patients do when using or considering complimentary and alternative therapies?

Cancer patients who are using or considering complementary and alternative medicine should discuss this decision with their health care provider, as they would any therapy. Some complementary and alternative therapies may interfere with standard treatment or may be harmful when used along with standard treatment. The booklet "Thinking About Complementary and Alternative Medicine: A Guide for People with Cancer" discusses choices that people face in making decisions about cancer treatment and includes suggestions on how to talk with health care providers about these choices.

As with any medicine or treatment, it is a good idea to learn about the therapy, including whether the results of scientific studies support the claims that are made for it.

6. When considering complimentary and alternative treatments, what questions should patients ask their health care providers?

What benefits can be expected from this therapy?

What are the risks associated with this therapy?

Do the known benefits outweigh the risks?

What are the potential side effects?

Will the therapy interfere with conventional treatment?

Is this therapy part of a clinical trial? If so, who is sponsoring the trial?

Will the therapy be covered by health insurance?

Further information on evaluating CAM therapies, selecting practitioners, and considering financial issues for CAM treatment is available from NCCAM.

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