Complementary & Alternative Medicine and Your Health
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What is complementary and alternative medicine?

Alternative medicine practices are those not typically used in conventional medicine. Exactly what’s considered alternative medicine changes constantly as more treatments undergo study and move into the mainstream. When alternative practices are used with conventional therapies, it’s called complementary medicine. An example is using tai chi (see page 17) in addition to prescription medication to manage anxiety.

Many people combine complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) treatments with their conventional medical care. This has led to a new concept called integrative medicine. Integrative medicine combines the best of conventional medicine with evidence-based CAM treatments to meet the full needs of a person — body, mind and spirit.

Hundreds of CAM therapies are available. Most can be divided into the following five major groups:

- Herbal supplements
- Hands-on therapies
- Mind-body practices
- Energy therapies
- Other approaches
Understanding the research

Today you have more treatment options than ever before. That’s why it’s important to learn the pros and cons of any treatment you’re considering. Ask your doctor for information on research results to help you make informed decisions about treatment options, including CAM therapies. You can also find information on your own, but it’s important to understand the quality of research.

As you dig into the medical literature for studies about CAM treatments, you’ll see several terms that describe different types of research:

- **Clinical studies** are those that involve human beings, not animals. Clinical trials take place only after initial research, including animal studies, has shown promise.

- **Randomized, controlled trials** divide participants into groups on a random basis — using the statistical equivalent of a coin toss. The first group receives the treatment under investigation. The second is a control group. People in this group receive standard treatment, no treatment or an inactive substance called a placebo. This helps to ensure that the groups will be similar.

- **Double-blind studies** are conducted so that neither the researchers nor the participants know who will receive the active treatment and who will receive the placebo.

- **Prospective studies** are forward-looking. Researchers establish criteria for study participants to follow and then measure or describe the results. Information from
these studies is usually more reliable than that from retrospective studies.

- **Retrospective studies** involve looking at past data (for example, asking participants to recall information), which leaves more room for errors in interpretation.

- **Peer-reviewed journals** only publish articles that have been reviewed by an independent panel of medical experts.

The gold standard for research is prospective double-blind studies that have been carefully controlled, randomized and published in peer-reviewed journals. When these involve large numbers of people (several hundred or more) studied over several years at several centers, they gain even more credibility. Doctors also like to see studies that are replicated — repeated by different investigators with generally the same results.

To date, a small but growing number of CAM treatments have been researched according to rigorous standards. The jury is still out on whether many of these therapies are helpful, but several have become part of conventional practice.
Complementary & integrative medicine at Mayo Clinic

Mayo Clinic’s Complementary and Integrative Medicine program was founded in 2001 to address growing interest in health and wellness practices not typically considered part of conventional medical care — treatments such as meditation, massage therapy, and the use of herbs and other dietary supplements. The program conducts research in complementary and integrative therapies, provides education about health and wellness, and also makes services such as massage and acupuncture available to patients while at Mayo Clinic.

The Mayo Clinic approach to the assessment of CAM is to apply the same standards that are used to evaluate conventional treatments:

- Do sound scientific research to investigate effectiveness and safety.
- Educate health care providers and others about the results.
- Bring the best new knowledge to medicine.

This effort is well under way. Already Mayo Clinic has done several studies that helped dispel exaggerated claims of certain cancer cures. Other studies have shown the value of providing massage to patients after open-heart surgery — leading to the incorporation of massage into routine post-operative care at Mayo Clinic. Ongoing studies are looking at the roles of some herbs in treating chronic and common health problems.
Herbal supplements

Herbal supplements, sometimes called botanicals, aren’t new; plants have been used for medicinal purposes for thousands of years. However, most herbal supplements haven’t been subjected to the same scrutiny or regulation as that of medications.

Herbs, vitamins and minerals are regulated as dietary supplements by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The rules for dietary supplements are as follows:

- **Manufacturers don’t have to seek FDA approval before putting dietary supplements on the market.** In addition, companies can claim that products address a nutrient deficiency, support health or are linked to body functions, if they have supporting research and they include a disclaimer that the FDA hasn’t evaluated the claim.

- **Manufacturers must follow good manufacturing practices (GMPs) to ensure that supplements are processed consistently and meet quality standards.** GMPs are intended to keep the wrong ingredients and contaminants, such as pesticides and lead, out of supplements, as well as make sure that the right ingredients are included in appropriate amounts.

- **Once a dietary supplement is on the market, the FDA is responsible for monitoring its safety.** If the FDA finds a product to be unsafe, it can take action against the manufacturer or distributor or both and may issue a warning or require that the product be removed from the market.
• These regulations are intended to ensure that herbal supplements meet quality standards and that the FDA can remove dangerous products from the market. The rules do not, however, guarantee that herbal supplements are safe for anyone to use. Some herbal supplements — including products labeled as “natural” — have drug-like effects that can be dangerous. So it’s important to do your homework and investigate potential benefits and side effects of herbal supplements before you try them.

Tips for using herbs safely

If you use herbal supplements, remember:

• **Do your homework.** The Dietary Supplements Labels Database, which is available on the National Library of Medicine’s website, has information on thousands of supplements sold in the United States. You can look up products by brand name, uses, active ingredient or manufacturer. You can also find information about specific herbs or botanicals — common names, uses, potential side effects — on the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) website.

• **Read the label and look for a seal of approval.** Quality and strength can vary greatly by brand. Look for a seal of approval from an independent verification program, such as the U.S. Pharmacopeia’s “USP Dietary Supplement Verified” mark, indicating that the supplements meet certain standards of quality. If you don’t understand something on the label, ask your doctor or pharmacist.
• **Follow directions.** Similar to over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription drugs, herbal products have active ingredients that can affect how your body functions. Don’t exceed the recommended dosages. Some herbs can be harmful if taken for too long a time period.

• **Keep track of what you take.** Take one type of supplement at a time to try to determine its effect. Make a note of what you take, how much and how it affects you. Does it do what it claims to do? Do you experience any side effects, such as drowsiness, sleeplessness, headache or nausea?

• **Tell your doctor what you’re taking.** Some herbs may interfere with the effectiveness of prescription or OTC drugs or have other harmful effects. (See “Avoid herb-drug interactions” on page 12.) In addition, make sure you don’t have an underlying medical condition that calls for treatment by your doctor. Avoid taking any herbs for several weeks before you’re scheduled to have surgery.

• **Avoid herbs if you’re pregnant or breast-feeding.** Unless your doctor approves, don’t take any medications — prescription, OTC or herbal — when you’re pregnant or breast-feeding. They can harm your baby.

• **Keep up on alerts and recalls.** The FDA and NCCAM maintain lists of supplements that are under regulatory review or that have been reported to cause adverse effects. Check their websites periodically for updates.
Common herbal remedies
Here’s an overview of some of the most commonly used herbal supplements:

- Chamomile
- Echinacea
- Garlic
- Ginger
- Ginkgo
- Ginseng
- Kava
- Peppermint
- St. John’s wort

**Chamomile** (*Matricaria recutita*) is often used for sleeplessness and stomach ailments. When combined with other herbs, chamomile may offer some relief for indigestion. Chamomile is generally safe, but some people may have allergic reactions, especially if they’re allergic to related plants, such as ragweed, chrysanthemums, marigolds and daisies.

**Echinacea** (*Echinacea pallida, Echinacea purpurea*) is commonly used for colds and influenza, but it’s unclear if there are any significant benefits. Echinacea generally causes few side effects, but some people may have allergic reactions, especially if they’re allergic to related plants, such as ragweed, chrysanthemums, marigolds and daisies.
Garlic (*Allium sativum*) is commonly used to lower cholesterol, reduce blood pressure and prevent heart disease. There is some evidence that taking garlic can slightly lower blood cholesterol and slow hardening of the arteries. Use garlic with caution if you’re planning to have surgery or dental work, or if you have a bleeding disorder. Garlic has also been found to interact with some medications, such as isoniazid (Nydrazid) and saquinavir (Invirase).

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) is used for nausea caused by motion, chemotherapy or surgery. Studies have shown mixed results. Side effects are minimal but may include heartburn and diarrhea. Theoretically, excessive doses of ginger can increase the risk of bleeding and should be avoided by people taking anticoagulant or antiplatelet medications.

Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) is used for a variety of problems. Examples include short-term memory loss, ringing in the ears, headaches and poor circulation in the legs. While some early studies suggested that taking ginkgo leaf extract orally may improve cognitive function in older adults with mild age-related memory or cognitive impairment, most recent, large-scale studies have found no benefit. Raw ginkgo seeds can cause serious adverse reactions, but products made from standardized ginkgo leaf extracts appear to be safe when used appropriately. Ginkgo interacts with many medications. In addition, it may increase bleeding risk, so people who take anticoagulant drugs, have bleeding disorders, or are scheduled to have surgery or dental procedures should avoid it.
Ginseng (*Panax ginseng, Panax quinquefolius*) is used for many purposes, such as to boost energy, reduce stress and combat the effects of aging. There’s some limited scientific evidence that ginseng is effective in these areas. Short-term use of ginseng appears to be safe for most people. However, ginseng may decrease the effectiveness of warfarin (Coumadin, Panwarfarin). Ginseng may also lower blood sugar. If you have diabetes or take prescription medications, don’t use ginseng without talking with your doctor.

Kava (*Piper methysticum*), also called kava kava, is used to relieve anxiety and treat insomnia. Studies suggest that kava may be beneficial for anxiety. However, cases of severe liver damage have been reported in people using kava, prompting the FDA to issue a warning about its use. Until more is known, don’t take kava or products that contain it. If you’ve already used kava, contact your doctor for advice.

Peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) is used for a variety of health conditions, including indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome. A few studies have found that peppermint, in combination with caraway oil, may help relieve indigestion. Peppermint may also help symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Peppermint is generally safe. It can cause heartburn.

St. John’s wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is commonly used for depression, anxiety and sleep disorders. St. John’s wort may be useful for mild to moderate depression. However, anyone who may have depression should see his or her doctor. In addition, St. John’s wort interacts with a long list of prescription medications. For these reasons, don’t use it without first talking to your doctor.
Avoid herb-drug interactions

Herbal supplements contain ingredients that may not mix safely with prescription or over-the-counter drugs. Here are two examples – one mild and one serious. Keep in mind that many other herbs also can interact with drugs.

• Using ginkgo if you regularly use aspirin or warfarin may cause spontaneous and excessive bleeding. However, most recent studies haven’t found any effect on platelets or other bleeding markers.

• St. John’s wort can cause serious problems by altering the effects of many prescription medications, such as antidepressants, digoxin (Lanoxin), warfarin and cyclosporine (Neoral, Sandimmune).

In addition, many herbal supplements can affect your safety during surgery. Some may decrease the effectiveness of anesthetics or cause dangerous complications, such as bleeding or high blood pressure. Tell your doctor about any herbs you’re taking or considering taking as soon as you know you need surgery.
One attraction of many complementary and alternative treatments is that they involve healing human touch. Examples include spinal manipulation and massage.

Spinal manipulation
Spinal manipulation is a form of manual therapy that involves the movement of a joint beyond its usual range of motion but not past its anatomic range of motion. Spinal manipulation is most often used by chiropractors, physical therapists and osteopathic doctors, but conventional doctors also may use spinal manipulation.

Several studies suggest that spinal manipulation is mildly helpful for uncomplicated acute low back pain. Some research also suggests that spinal manipulation may help migraines and neck-related headaches, neck pain, and upper and lower extremity joint conditions.

Spinal manipulation may cause side effects, such as temporary headaches, tiredness or discomfort in the areas that were treated. No procedure is risk-free, however, and there are some isolated reports of strokes occurring following vigorous neck manipulation. Talk with your doctor if you’re considering spinal manipulation.
Massage

Massage therapy focuses on muscles and connective tissues. Hundreds of types of massage exist because almost every culture has a tradition of massage therapy. Some of the most common types of massage include:

- Swedish massage
- Deep-tissue massage
- Trigger point massage

Massage is often used as part of physical therapy, sports medicine and nursing care. It may be used, for example, to relieve muscle tension or promote relaxation, or to help people as they undergo other types of medical treatment. It’s also accepted as a simple means for healthy people to relieve stress and just feel good. Scientific evidence on massage therapy is growing rapidly, including a number of studies conducted at Mayo Clinic. Importantly, when used appropriately massage therapy appears to have few serious risks.

If you have a medical condition or an injury — or you just aren’t sure whether massage therapy would be appropriate for you — discuss your concerns with your doctor. You should also check with your doctor before getting a massage if you’re pregnant.
Here are some tips if you’re considering massage therapy:

- Before beginning massage therapy, ask about the therapist’s training, experience and credentials. Also ask about the number of treatments that might be needed.
- Tell your massage therapist about any health problems or concerns you have.
- Don’t allow massage on any part of your body that has open or healing wounds, skin infections, blood clots, fractures or weakened bones (such as from osteoporosis or cancer), or where you recently had surgery.
- A massage should feel good or cause very little discomfort. If this isn’t the case, tell the massage therapist right away.
Mind-body practices

Mind-body practices are based on the idea that the mind and body are intricately connected. Just as a physical illness can affect your emotions, emotional upset or stress can affect your physical health. Mind-body treatments seek to use the power of the mind to help the body fight stress and disease. When practiced regularly, such therapies can help the body to adapt to stress and may improve overall health. Examples of mind-body practices include meditation, hypnosis, tai chi and yoga.

Meditation

Meditation produces a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil mind. During meditation, you focus your attention and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding your mind and causing stress.

Meditation is used for many conditions, including anxiety, cancer, depression, fatigue, high blood pressure, pain and sleep problems. A growing body of research supports the health benefits of meditation.

Meditation is generally safe for healthy people. In rare cases, meditation may worsen symptoms in people with certain psychiatric problems. If you have significant mental health issues, talk with your doctor before starting meditation.
Hypnosis
Hypnosis produces a state of deep relaxation, but your mind stays alert. During hypnosis, you can receive suggestions designed to decrease your perception of pain or to help you stop habits such as smoking. No one knows exactly how hypnosis works, but experts believe it alters your brain wave patterns in much the same way as other relaxation techniques. By the way, don’t worry about what you see in movies and on TV: You can’t be forced under hypnosis to do something that’s truly against your will.

Hypnosis may help with pain control. Studies show that it can reduce anxiety before a medical or dental procedure. In addition, hypnosis has been used with mixed success for weight loss, smoking cessation and some phobias.

Hypnosis for the treatment of medical and mental conditions should be performed only by licensed clinicians, such as doctors and therapists.

Tai chi
Sometimes described as “meditation in motion,” tai chi involves slow, gentle, dance-like movements accompanied by deep breathing. People practice tai chi for various health-related purposes, such as:

- To improve physical condition, muscle strength, coordination and flexibility
- To improve balance and decrease the risk of falls
- To ease pain and stiffness, for example, from osteoarthritis

Although tai chi is generally safe, consider talking with your doctor before starting a new program. This is particularly important if you are pregnant, have problems with your joints or spine, have fractures, or have severe osteoporosis.
Yoga typically combines physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation. Yoga is intended to increase relaxation and balance the mind, body and spirit. Many people practice yoga for fitness and stress relief. Yoga is also used for a variety of health conditions, including anxiety disorders or stress, asthma, high blood pressure and depression.

Research suggests that yoga might:

- Enhance mood and well-being
- Counteract stress
- Reduce heart rate and blood pressure
- Increase lung capacity
- Improve muscle relaxation
- Decrease back pain
- Help with anxiety, depression and insomnia
- Improve overall physical fitness, strength and flexibility

However, more well-designed studies are needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn about yoga’s use for specific health conditions.

Overall, yoga is considered safe if you’re generally healthy. However, some yoga positions can put significant strain on your lower back and your joints. See your doctor before you begin a yoga class if you have disk disease of the spine, extremely high or low blood pressure, glaucoma, retinal detachment or severe osteoporosis. Some yoga postures might not be right for you.
Energy therapies

Some CAM practices involve manipulation of various energy fields to affect health. One of the best known is acupuncture. Acupuncture is a technique for balancing the flow of energy or life force believed to flow through your body. Other examples of energy therapies are reiki and healing touch.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture originated in China thousands of years ago. In traditional Chinese medicine, disease is thought to be caused by an imbalanced or blocked flow of energy — known as qi or chi. Acupuncture is a technique for balancing the flow of energy through the pathways (meridians) in your body. Practitioners insert thin needles into points along the meridians to rebalance the qi.

Contemporary researchers tend to see acupuncture slightly differently — as a way to stimulate nerves, muscles and connective tissue to boost the body’s natural painkillers and increase blood flow.

Research on acupuncture has focused largely on its use for pain. A number of studies have shown that acupuncture may be helpful in treating low back pain, labor pain, knee pain from osteoarthritis, and fibromyalgia. Acupuncture may also help reduce nausea and vomiting in people receiving chemotherapy.
Acupuncture, when used appropriately, is generally well tolerated. Adverse side effects are rare when acupuncture is performed by an experienced practitioner.

Reiki therapy
Although some people use the terms healing touch and reiki therapy interchangeably, there are differences in principles and training. Reiki therapy originated with Buddhist monks. Rei means “universal spirit” and ki means “life energy.” Therefore, reiki literally means “universal life energy.” By applying the hands on or near the body, the reiki practitioner attempts to transmit or deliver energy.

Reiki therapy is used for a variety of health purposes, but primarily for pain, stress and fatigue, recovery from surgery or cancer therapy, improving feelings of well-being, and for end-of-life care. However, the theories of reiki therapy are not supported by scientific research. Some people find the therapy to be relaxing, and relaxation can be good for your health. No adverse reactions related to reiki therapy have been reported.
Other approaches

CAM also includes whole medical systems, which are complete systems of theory and practice that have evolved over time in different cultures and apart from conventional medicine. Ayurvedic medicine is an example of an ancient whole medical system. More modern systems that have developed in the past few centuries include homeopathy and naturopathy.

Ayurveda

Ayurveda is one of the oldest systems of health care and was started in India thousands of years ago. Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word that means “science of life.”

Ayurvedic medicine is based on the theory that all things in the universe are joined together and that all forms of life consist of combinations of five energy elements: ether, air, fire, water and earth. When these elements are balanced, a person is healthy. When they’re imbalanced, the body is weakened and susceptible to illness.

As vital life energy (prana) circulates throughout the body, it’s influenced by elements called doshas:

- **Vata dosha** is a combination of the elements of ether and air. It’s considered the most powerful dosha because it controls movement and essential body processes such as cell division, the heart, breathing and the mind.
- **Pitta dosha** is a combination of the elements of fire and water. The pitta dosha is believed to control the body’s hormones and digestive system.
• **Kapha dosha** combines the elements of water and earth. The kapha dosha is thought to help maintain strength and immunity and control growth.

Ayurvedic treatment goals include cleansing the body of substances that can cause disease, reducing symptoms and increasing resistance to disease. Some therapies, such as massage or meditation, appear to be safe, but others, such as those involving certain herbs or preparations that contain very small amounts of metals, may be risky.

Scientific evidence for the effectiveness of ayurvedic practices varies, and more rigorous research is needed to determine which practices are safe and effective. Women who are pregnant or breast-feeding or people who are thinking of using ayurvedic therapy to treat a child should consult their doctor first.
Homeopathy

Homeopathy, also known as homeopathic medicine, is a whole medical system that was developed in Germany more than 200 years ago and has been practiced in the United States since the early 19th century. The term homeopathy comes from the Greek words homeo, meaning “similar,” and pathos, meaning “suffering” or “disease.” Homeopathy seeks to stimulate the body’s ability to heal itself by giving very small doses of highly diluted substances. Homeopathy is based on two main principles:

• **The law of similars.** Sometimes stated as “Like cures like,” the idea is that if a substance in large amounts causes a disease, that same substance in small amounts can cure it.

• **The law of infinitesimals.** Literally, infinitesimal means “too small to be measured.” According to this belief, the more dilute a substance, the more potent it is against a given disease.

Homeopathy is a controversial practice because a number of its key concepts are not consistent with contemporary medicine and science. Critics think it is implausible that a remedy containing a miniscule amount of an active ingredient can have any biological effect — beneficial or otherwise. And, indeed, there is little evidence to support homeopathy as an effective treatment for any specific condition.

When used appropriately, most homeopathic preparations are safe. However, women who are pregnant or breast-feeding should consult their doctors before trying homeopathy.
Naturopathy

Naturopathy is a medical system that emphasizes the healing power of nature and the body’s natural ability to heal itself. It involves a variety of traditional and modern therapies. Practitioners may use herbal medicine, homeopathy, nutrition and lifestyle counseling, exercise, physical therapy, acupuncture, and spinal manipulation.

In the United States, naturopathy may be practiced by traditional naturopaths, naturopathic doctors and other health care providers who offer naturopathic services. Traditional naturopaths, also known simply as naturopaths, emphasize a healthy lifestyle, strengthening and cleansing the body, and noninvasive treatments. They don’t use prescription drugs, injections, X-rays or surgery.

Although some of the individual therapies used in naturopathy have been studied for efficacy and safety, naturopathy as a general approach has not been widely researched. In addition, naturopathy is not a complete substitute for conventional care. Relying exclusively on naturopathic treatments and avoiding conventional medical care may be harmful or, in some circumstances (for example, a severe injury or an infection), have serious health consequences.
How to evaluate CAM therapies

Understanding a therapy’s potential benefits, risks and scientific evidence is critical to your health and safety. Your doctor or other health care provider can be a valuable resource. Tell them about the therapy you are considering and ask any questions you may have about safety, effectiveness, or interactions with medications (prescription or nonprescription) or other dietary supplements.

Get the facts, skip the hype

You can find thousands of websites devoted to health, but be careful. Avoid sites that promote herbs, supplements or other treatments from one particular company. Instead look for websites created by national medical groups, universities or government agencies.

A good place to start your research is the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), part of the National Institutes of Health. The NCCAM Clearinghouse provides information on CAM therapies, including searches of federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The website is www.nccam.nih.gov.
Carefully evaluate any information you find on the Internet. To weed out the good information from the bad, use the three D’s:

- **Dates.** Search for the most recent information you can find. Reputable websites include a date for each article they post. If you don’t see a date, don’t assume the article is recent.

- **Documentation.** Check for the source of information. Notice whether articles refer to published medical research. Are qualified health professionals creating and reviewing the information? Look for the logo from the Health on the Net Foundation, which means that the site follows the foundation’s principles for reliability and credibility of information.

- **Double-check.** Visit several health sites and compare the information they offer. If you can’t find supporting evidence to back up the claims of a CAM product, be skeptical. And before you follow any medical advice, ask your doctor for guidance.

**Find and evaluate providers**

After gathering information about a treatment, the next step is to find a practitioner who offers it. Choosing a name from the phone book is risky if you have no other information about the provider. Check your state government listings for agencies that regulate and license health care providers. These agencies may list names of practitioners in your area and offer a way to check credentials.

Talk with your doctor or another trusted health care professional to get advice. Also talk to people who’ve received the treatment you’re considering and ask about their experience with specific providers.
Before you agree to treatment, call the provider to schedule an informational interview. At that first visit, be prepared to answer questions about your health — past and present. Take a written list of surgeries, injuries and major illnesses, as well as the prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and vitamins and other supplements you take. Also come prepared to ask questions, such as:

- Are there any research studies that show that this therapy may be helpful?
- What benefits can I expect from the therapy?
- What are the risks associated with the therapy?
- What side effects can be expected?
- Will the therapy interfere with my daily activities?
- How long will I need to undergo treatment, or how many visits will I need?
- How often will my progress or treatment plan be assessed?
- What are the costs for the recommended treatments? Will I need to buy any equipment or supplies?
- Could the therapy interfere with conventional treatments?
- Are there any conditions for which this treatment should not be used?

Be on the lookout for scams

Scammers have perfected ways to convince you that their CAM products are the best. These opportunists often target people who are overweight or who have medical conditions for which there is no cure, such as multiple sclerosis, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS and arthritis. Remember if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Be alert for these red flags:

- **Big promises.** Advertisements call the product a “miracle cure” or “revolutionary discovery.” If that were true, it
would be widely reported in the media and your doctor would recommend it.

- **Pseudomedical jargon.** Although terms such as purify, detoxify and energize may sound impressive and may even have an element of truth, they’re generally used to cover up a lack of scientific proof.

- **Cure-alls.** The manufacturer claims that the product can treat a wide range of symptoms, or cure or prevent a number of diseases. No single product can do all this.

- **Testimonials.** Anecdotes from individuals who have used the product are no substitute for scientific proof. If the product’s claims were backed up with hard evidence, the manufacturer would say so.

### Keep your doctor in the loop

Ideally, the therapies you use should work together — and not against each other. That’s why it’s important to tell your doctor about any CAM practices you use. Here are some tips for keeping your doctor in the loop:

- Tell your doctor about all therapies or treatments you’re using — including over-the-counter and prescription medicines, as well as dietary and herbal supplements.

- When completing patient history forms, be sure to include all therapies and treatments you use. Make a list in advance.

- If you’re considering a new CAM therapy, ask your doctor about its safety, effectiveness and possible interactions with medications (both prescription and nonprescription).

- Never change or stop your conventional treatment — such as your dose of prescribed medication — without first talking to your doctor.
References


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