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Complementary and Integrative Methods

Complementary and integrative medicine are products and practices used along with standard medical care to help manage symptoms and side effects from cancer and its treatment. Learn what these terms mean and find information to help you make the most informed and safest decision about whether to use them.

- [What Are Complementary and Integrative Methods?](#)
- [Where Can I Find Trustworthy Info on Complementary and Integrative Methods?](#)
- [Which Complementary Methods Are Likely Safe?](#)
- [Will My Insurance Cover Complementary and Integrative Therapies?](#)
- [How Do I Talk to My Doctor About Complementary and Integrative Methods?](#)

What Are Complementary and Integrative Methods?

Complementary and *integrative* are terms used to describe many kinds of products and practices that are not part of standard medical care but may be used by people with cancer to better manage cancer-related symptoms and side effects.

- [Why do people with cancer use complementary methods?](#)
- [Using a complementary method is your decision](#)

Complementary methods may be appealing because they use your own body, your own mind, or things found in nature. And most complementary methods rarely cause harm.

Using a complementary method is your decision

It's important to learn as much as possible about a treatment before you use it. But be aware that the information available about many complementary methods often includes less high-quality research than what is available about mainstream treatments. This is one of the reasons that it is sometimes impossible to say much about whether a complementary method is likely to help you, or how safe it might be. Even if only limited information is available, understanding the limits of what is known can help you make your decision.

The choice to use complementary or integrative methods is yours. You can use them more safely if you:

- Learn about the risks and benefits of each therapy from reliable scientific sources.
- Talk with your doctor about your plans to use any self-prescribed remedy instead of medicine they prescribed. Ask about risks and benefits and find out about possible interactions with standard treatments.
- Ask your doctor or cancer care team to refer you to someone who is reliable and trusted if you need a practitioner for a complementary treatment (such as for massage therapy).
- Keep in mind that most complementary methods have not been tested for safety in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, so the possible effects on a fetus or nursing child are mostly unknown.
- Talk with your child's doctor before giving supplements or other remedies to your child.

You can find more information about specific types of complementary and integrative methods on the National Cancer Institute website, www.cancer.gov².

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/alternative-

[medicine/what-is-alternative-medicine.html](#)

2. www.cancer.gov/

References

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US adults with a history of colorectal cancer: a nationally representative survey. *Support Care Cancer*. 2021;29(1):271-278. doi: 10.1007/s00520-020-05494-x.

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Where Can I Find Trustworthy Info on Complementary and Integrative Methods?

There's a great deal of interest in [complementary and integrative methods](#), and information can be found in a wide variety of sources. This can make it hard to know what's true and who to trust.

- [Why is it hard to find trustworthy information about complementary therapies?](#)
- [Where can I find trustworthy information about complementary methods?](#)

Why is it hard to find trustworthy information about complementary therapies?

Testing may not be required by law

Unlike the case with drug treatments, treatments that do not make claims to treat specific diseases or side effects can be sold without having to be tested in scientific studies in the United States. This can lead to a lack of data about whether the treatment is safe and effective.

This is true for many [dietary supplements](#)¹. There are requirements about how dietary supplements must be made and labeled, but no requirements that they be tested to find out if they actually help, or if they are safe to use.

There have been some studies of complementary methods such as massage therapy and acupuncture. Most often they are shown to be safe, and some studies have found they may be helpful when used along with standard treatments.

Some treatments are assumed to be safe

Some people choose complementary therapies because they think they don't have any harmful side effects. This may not be true. Some complementary therapies have been found to cause serious problems. Even so, most of these problems are not reported to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), so they are not studied.

For example, we know that certain vitamins and minerals can increase the risk of some cancers or other illnesses, especially if too much is taken. Also, it has been shown that some complementary methods can interfere with standard treatments.

However, many complementary mind-body methods are very safe. It's rare for people to have problems with activities like meditation or music therapy.

Some treatments are assumed to be effective

Some people might think that treatments derived from natural products or from folk remedies that have been used for thousands of years must work and be safe. However, just because a treatment method is 'natural' or has been used a long time does not mean that it works and is safe.

When scientific studies have not been done, it can be hard to tell if a person's illness is getting better because of the treatment. Herbal treatments that are given for illnesses that go away on their own may be given credit for curing the person. Or the treatment might make the person feel better for a short time but have no lasting effect.

Finding reliable information can be a challenge

Controlled human studies ([clinical trials](#)²) are the best way to find out if a treatment works. These studies typically include large groups of people, compare new treatments to treatments known to work, control who gets which treatment, and carefully measure the benefits and harms of each treatment. This can take a good bit of time and money. But clinical trials are vital to show that a treatment is safe and effective.

When looking for studies on a particular treatment, it is important to know whether a

Where can I find trustworthy information about complementary methods?

Along with the American Cancer Society, the following is a partial list of websites and phone numbers of reputable groups that provide reliable information on complementary and alternative therapies*:

6. cam.cancer.gov/

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Which Complementary Methods Are Likely Safe?

If you are interested in learning more about what complementary and integrative methods might be good choices for you, check out this [Trying Mind-Body Medicine for Whole Person Cancer Care pocket guide](#)².

Some other types of complementary methods, such as [dietary supplements](#)³, have generally not been proven to help prevent or treat cancer or its symptoms, and might sometimes even cause harm. The American Cancer Society recommends discussing any type of complementary treatment you are considering with your cancer treatment team before you try it.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/booklets-flyers/cancer-and-spirituality-pocket-guide.pdf
2. www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/booklets-flyers/mind-body-whole-person-cancer-guide.pdf
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/complementary-and-integrative-medicine/dietary-supplements.html

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