



Integrative Medicine: Understanding Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Cancer patients often turn to sources besides their doctors to find treatments for the disease or ways to reduce side effects. In fact, studies indicate that anywhere from 50% to 80% of cancer patients try at least one type of complementary or alternative medicine in their quest to get well.

If you are considering complementary or alternative medicine, the following information can help you choose wisely from the seemingly countless options.

The term “complementary medicine” describes nonconventional approaches used *together with* conventional treatments. “Alternative medicine,” on the other hand, is used *in place of* conventional treatments. Taken together, complementary and alternative medicine includes a wide variety of options. Among them are:

- Mind-body interventions, such as guided imagery and hypnosis
- Herbal medicines and special diets
- Manipulative and body-based therapies, such as massage
- Energy therapies, such as Reiki and qigong
- Whole medical systems, such as traditional Chinese medicine or Ayurvedic medicine (traditional medicine from India)

You might also hear the term integrative medicine, which is an approach to treatment that makes use of all appropriate therapeutic approaches, providers, and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing, according to the Consortium of Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine.

Consider the benefits and risks

Research has shown that some complementary treatments are useful in managing symptoms of cancer. For instance, acupuncture, which involves stimulating specific locations in the



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body by puncturing the skin with fine needles, has been proven effective in managing chemotherapy-associated nausea and vomiting, in controlling pain associated with surgery, and in relieving dry mouth after radiation therapy. Yoga has been shown to improve cancer patients’ quality of life, sleep, and sense of well-being.

Also, natural products have given rise to many cancer drugs. For example, vincristine (used to treat several types of cancer, including lymphoma and leukemia) comes from the periwinkle plant; Taxol (used to treat breast and ovarian cancer) is derived from a fungus isolated from the inner bark of the Pacific yew tree; and camptothecin (used to treat colon cancer) comes from a Chinese tree.

However, other forms of complementary or alternative treatments have not been shown to offer any benefit. For instance, laetrile (also known as amygdaline, a chemical found in the pits of many fruits and in numerous plants) is sometimes taken as a cancer treatment but has been shown ineffective against the disease. Worse, some seemingly harmless herbs and vitamins may cause anti-cancer drugs to work less effectively. High doses of vitamins, for example, may affect how radiation and chemotherapy work, and the herb St. John’s

wort, often used for treating depression, may make some cancer medications less powerful.

Consult a doctor

Complementary and alternative therapies should not be used alone to *treat* cancer outside of a clinical trial, according to experts at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. While conventional medicine is studied scientifically in laboratory and clinical trials, many complementary and alternative therapies have not been appropriately researched.

It is important that you tell your doctor about any therapies you are using or considering. That way, your doctor can ensure the therapy is safe and won’t conflict with other treatments. Your doctor can also advise you about the benefits, risks, and possible side effects of the therapy.

Beware online information

Just because something is online doesn’t mean it’s true. The Internet is full of conflicting and erroneous health information, but there are also many reputable Web sites that you can trust. One good online source for complementary and alternative medicine is Complementary/Integrative Medicine Educational Resources (www.mdanderson.org/departments/CIMER), part of the Integrative Medicine Program at M. D. Anderson. The Web site offers reviews of published research studies of complementary and alternative medicine, a list of potential interactions between some drugs and herbal and other supplements, and links to other trustworthy Web sites. ●

For more information, talk to your physician, or:

- visit www.mdanderson.org
- call askMDAnderson at 1-877-632-6789

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