

Traditional, Complimentary and Integrative Medicine

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Editorial Note

Traditional medicine

Traditional medicine has a long history. It is the sum total of the knowledge, skill, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.

This knowledge or practice may rely exclusively on past experience and observation handed down orally or in writing from generation to generation. These practices are native to the country in which they are practiced. The majority of indigenous traditional medicine has been practiced at the primary health care level.

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Complementary medicine

The terms “complementary medicine” or “alternative medicine” refer to a broad set of health care practices that are not part of that country's own tradition or conventional medicine and are not fully integrated into the dominant health-care system. They are used interchangeably with traditional medicine in some countries.

Although claims made by CAM treatment providers about the benefits of the treatments can sound promising, we do not know how safe many CAM treatments are or how well they work. If you are using or considering using a complementary or alternative therapy, you should talk with your doctor or nurse. Some CAM therapies may interfere with standard treatment or even be harmful. See our overview on CAM for more information.

You may not hear about these treatments from your doctor or cancer team, but others may talk about things like traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, hypnosis, or machines that are supposed to find or cure cancer. Some people may recommend “body cleansing” with enemas or detoxification diets with special foods and preparation methods.

Some of these methods must be done by a person with formal education and training, such as art or music therapy, and may be offered along with regular cancer treatment. Others are given by people with informal or traditional training. They can involve everything from colon therapy to entirely different systems that don't use any of the medical treatments your doctor uses. Still other types of treatment may be recommended by the person who is selling a product in a store or TV infomercial, such as herbal products or juice from exotic fruits or vegetables.

Integrative medicine

Integrative medicine can help people with cancer, persistent pain, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and many other conditions better manage their symptoms and improve their quality of life by reducing fatigue, pain and anxiety. Examples of common practices include:

- Acupuncture
- Animal-assisted therapy
- Aromatherapy
- Dietary supplements
- Massage therapy
- Music therapy
- Meditation

The treatments promoted in integrative medicine are not substitutes for conventional medical care. They should be used in concert with standard medical treatment.

Certain therapies and products are not recommended at all or not recommended for certain conditions or people. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health is a good tool for researching a therapy you're considering. It's also important to talk with your health care provider before trying something new.

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