

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapy is known by many different terms, including alternative therapy, alternative medicine, holistic therapy and traditional medicine.

A wide range of treatments exists under the umbrella term of 'complementary therapy'. Each treatment has its own unique theory and practice, which makes it difficult to offer a blanket definition. Perhaps a simple definition can be reached by comparing the philosophy of complementary therapies with that of modern (conventional) medicine.

Historically, modern medicine evolved out of an assumption that the mind and body are separate. Disease and illness were viewed as mechanical breakdowns and, generally, it was these breakdowns and the symptoms they caused that were treated. Complementary therapies aim to treat the entire person, not just the symptoms.

A merging of therapies

Today, the division between conventional medicine and complementary therapies is blurring. Many complementary therapies are as grounded in anatomy and physiology as modern medicine, while modern medicine has widened its scope to include a more holistic approach to health care and has adopted therapies that originated in complementary medicine.

Complementary therapies are widely used

Complementary therapies are widely used in Australia. A survey conducted by the National Prescribing Service revealed that 65 per cent of Australians had used one or more complementary medicines in the previous 12 months.

Complementary therapies are often based on traditional knowledge; this is why there is sometimes less scientific evidence available about their safety and effectiveness.

However, the increasing use of complementary therapies has begun to fuel scientific research and some complementary therapies now have some scientific evidence about their safety and effectiveness, as well as a history of traditional use. Sometimes they are less invasive and more cost-effective than conventional medical treatments. Nonetheless, it's still important to ask about both potential benefits and potential harms of any therapy.

Natural and complementary medicines can be bought without prescription; however, they may still have side effects or interact with other drugs, or they may not be the most effective treatment for you. It's important to consider seeking advice from a qualified professional before using a complementary medicine, and to let your health professionals know about all medicines – herbal and conventional – that you are taking.

Shared philosophies

Complementary therapies tend to share a few core beliefs, including:

- Illness occurs if the body is out of balance.
- The body can heal itself and maintain a healthy state if given the right conditions.
- The whole person should be treated, not just the disease or the symptoms.
- The gentlest therapies must be tried first before harsher ones.
- There is no quick fix, since healing and balance take time.
- Natural products are preferable to synthetic ones.

Examples of complementary therapies

Some of the more popular complementary therapies include:

- Acupuncture
- Alexander technique
- Aromatherapy
- Herbal medicine
- Homeopathy
- Naturopathy
- Reiki
- Yoga.

Why people use complementary therapies

People may have more than one reason for choosing a complementary therapy and they may use other strategies at the same time to enhance their health. Some of the reasons for using complementary therapies include:

- Achieving and maintaining good health
- As an aid to the performance of everyday tasks
- Dissatisfaction with conventional medical practices
- Unsatisfactory doctor-patient relationships
- The desire to take charge of one's own health and medical problems
- The increase in easy-to-access consumer health information, including health information on the Internet
- Evidence of the benefits and safety of some complementary medicines and therapies
- Dissatisfaction with limited success rates or adverse side effects of prescription medicines
- The desire to receive health care that treats the whole person and not just their symptoms. (It's worth noting that both complementary healthcare practitioners and some conventional health professionals actively endorse holistic care.)

Studies show that the most frequent users of complementary therapies include well-educated women, high-income earners and people with chronic conditions. They also show that many people use complementary therapies and medicines because of their cultural traditions and beliefs.

You can use both but keep everyone informed

You don't always have to choose between conventional medicine and your preferred complementary therapy. They can often work well alongside each other. However, it is important to tell your doctor and your complementary therapist of all drugs, treatments and remedies you take. Herbs and homeopathic remedies can sometimes interact with prescription drugs and cause side effects.

Never stop taking prescribed medications, or change the dose, without the knowledge and approval of your doctor.

How to choose a complementary therapy practitioner

Some suggestions on finding a reputable practitioner include:

- Contact the professional association for your chosen therapy and ask for a list of members in your area.
- Ask your doctor for a referral.
- Ask your friends for word-of-mouth recommendations.
- During the first visit with your practitioner, ask about their training and qualifications.
- Be very cautious about any practitioner who advises you to abandon your conventional medical treatment.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist

- Complementary therapist
- Complementary therapy associations

- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines.

Things to remember

- Complementary therapies are systems of health care that treat the whole person, not just the symptoms of their disease.
- Modern medicine is increasingly aware of complementary therapy techniques.
- You may not need to choose between conventional medicine and complementary therapies, but you must keep all your health carers informed to ensure you are using your medicines safely.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

NPS: Better choices, Better Health

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.