
Complementary therapies - choosing a practitioner

Summary

- To find the right complementary therapy and therapist for you, first ask your doctor for advice and recommendations.
 - Think about what you expect to gain from treatment before you start a complementary therapy.
 - Tell your doctor about any treatments you receive.
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Complementary therapies are used alongside mainstream or conventional medical treatments to help improve a person's health and wellbeing. Generally, a complementary therapy is based on age-old cultural practices and uses natural methods and products. These treatments are sometimes known collectively as "traditional medicine" or 'complementary and alternative medicine' (CAM).

Complementary therapies that are popular in Australia include acupuncture, aromatherapy, herbal medicine, yoga, meditation and massage. You should consult your doctor for advice and recommendations before choosing a CAM therapy or therapist.

Deciding on a complementary therapy

Your first step is deciding which complementary therapy you would like to try. The many complementary therapies available in Australia can be grouped into four broad classes:

- **Natural products, herbs and nutritional products** – the most popular of complementary therapies. These include herbal or botanical medicines, certain vitamins, minerals, dietary supplements and probiotics.
- **'Hands on' therapies or body work** – based on touch or manipulation of soft tissue, muscles and joints. Includes massage and Bowen therapy. Osteopathy and chiropractic are often spoken of as complementary therapies, but in Australia, these therapies are classed as allied health treatments.
- **Mind-body therapies** – aim to influence physical functioning and promote health using the mind, thoughts and feelings. Work on interactions among the brain, mind, body and behaviour. Includes acupuncture, meditation, yoga, tai chi, deep breathing, guided imagery and support groups.
- **Energy-based therapies** – based on manipulation of 'energy fields' in the body. Includes reiki, kinesiology, magnet and light therapies.

Other categories of therapies that are often used in conjunction with conventional medicine include:

- **Movement therapies** – such as Feldenkrais method, Alexander technique, pilates, Rolfing and Trager integration.
- **Whole (alternative) medical systems** – such as ayurvedic, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), naturopathy and homeopathy.

Your doctor is the best person to advise which therapies would be most helpful in treating your particular condition. Your personal likes and dislikes will further cut down the list.

Be clear on your complementary therapy goals

Think about what you expect to gain from treatment before you start a complementary therapy. Your doctor can help you to form realistic expectations. For example, you may hope to:

- Cure the condition
 - Manage the condition
 - Relieve pain
 - Reduce your risk of complications
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- Reduce your risk of disease
- Feel more relaxed.

Complementary therapies are unlikely to achieve all these goals on their own. However, combined with conventional medical treatment, they can often be a powerful tool.

How to find a complementary therapist

Ask your doctor, nurse or other registered healthcare professional to recommend a reputable therapist. Pharmacists and disease support organisations can also be helpful in providing appropriate advice.

Contact professional associations

Most complementary therapies have a professional association. Contact the appropriate association and ask for a list of members in your neighbourhood.

The association may offer more information – for example, they may tell you if the member speaks more than one language or practises more than one complementary therapy. Check if there are guidelines or codes of practice that explain the type and level of service expected from member practitioners.

During your first visit

Issues to consider during your first visit with a therapist may include:

- **Accessibility** – for example, if the clinic has sufficient parking and is close to home or public transport
- **First impressions** – for example, the building and grounds are well kept and the waiting room and treatment areas are hygienic
- **Level of professionalism** – when you tell the receptionist that you are a new client, are you given written information about the practice? Are you asked for a detailed health history or is your medical history ignored or not enquired about? Are you kept waiting for a long time?
- **Qualifications** – check the therapist's level of qualification. Find out if they are a member of a professional organisation and if that organisation has a code of ethics. Membership may be voluntary, but it suggests there is a commitment to maintaining appropriate standards of practice.
- **Personal manner** – your rapport with the therapist is important. Do you feel relaxed and welcome? Does the therapist listen to you? Are you comfortable with the thought of seeing this person on a regular basis?

Questions to ask about treatment

During the initial consultation, the therapist will recommend treatment. Questions you may wish to ask could include:

- How does the treatment work?
- Is there any proof that the treatment works?
- Will it interfere with any type of conventional medical treatment, such as prescription medicines?
- What side effects can I expect?
- How long will I need the treatment?
- What are the costs?

It is very important to tell your complementary therapist about your medical history and any conventional medical treatment that you are having, including prescription or over-the-counter medicines. Some herbal medicines or vitamin supplements can interact with prescription medicines and cause unwanted side effects.

A complementary therapist is not a doctor

Registered medical doctors (GPs) may train in one or more types of complementary therapy. This is often called 'integrative' or 'integrated' medicine. However, complementary therapists aren't required by law to have any conventional medical training, registration or qualifications at all.

The title 'doctor' may not mean that the therapist is actually a trained and registered medical practitioner. If unsure, ask the therapist to explain or show you evidence of their qualifications and experience.

Keep your doctor informed

It is very important to advise your regular doctor that you wish to attend or are attending a complementary therapist, and about any treatments you receive from the complementary therapist. This will help to reduce the risk of adverse reactions.

Be wary of some therapists

Not all therapists are reputable. Beware of any therapist who:

- Claims that their treatment is the only treatment that works
- Receives a commission when they sell a particular product – this could mean that the product they promote is not necessarily the most suitable
- Disagrees with your doctor and advises that you abandon conventional medical treatment
- Talks to you in inappropriate ways
- Touches you in ways that make you feel uncomfortable
- Charges very high fees or introduces hidden costs or charges.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- A complementary therapist
- Complementary therapy associations
- Complementary Healthcare Council of Australia Tel. (02) 6260 4022
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines
- Australian Government (TGA) – Office of Complementary Medicines Tel. (02) 6232 8634 or 1800 020 653 or TTY Tel. 1800 555 677 (then ask for 1800 020 653)

Things to remember

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

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