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## Complementary therapies

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### Summary

- Complementary therapies are used alongside conventional medicines or treatments.
  - Alternative therapies are used instead of conventional medicines or treatments.
  - There is no scientific or medical evidence for some complementary therapies and many alternative therapies. They may be unsafe or cause harmful side effects.
  - Do not assume that complementary medicines are safe just because they come from a natural source.
  - Talk to your doctor if you are thinking about taking complementary medicine, to make sure it is safe for you.
  - Never stop taking prescribed medications, or change the dose, without first discussing with your doctor.
  - Tell your complementary practitioner about all medicines, treatments and remedies you use.
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Complementary therapy is known by many different terms, including complementary medicine, alternative therapy, alternative medicine, holistic therapy and traditional medicine.

A wide range of treatments exists under the umbrella term 'complementary therapy', which makes it difficult to offer a blanket definition. Complementary therapies are used alongside conventional medicines or treatments.

Alternative therapies are sometimes grouped with complementary therapies, but they refer to different concepts. Alternative therapies are used in place of conventional medicines or treatments.

There is evidence to support the use of some complementary therapies, but alternative therapies are typically unproven or have been shown to be ineffective.

There is no scientific or medical evidence for some complementary therapies and many alternative therapies, and they may be unsafe or cause harmful side effects.

### Complementary therapies and conventional medicine

Conventional medicine is based on rigorous science and evaluation. Historically this has not been the case for complementary therapies. Some complementary therapies have now been tested in good quality scientific trials, but most have not.

Conventional medicine and complementary therapies can often be used alongside each other. However, it is important to tell your doctor and your complementary practitioner of all medicines, treatments and remedies you take or use. Some complementary therapies have the potential to cause side effects or interact with conventional medicines.

Never stop taking prescribed medications, or change the dose, without first discussing with your doctor.

See also [complementary therapies safety and legal issues](#).

### Use of complementary therapies

Complementary and alternative therapies are estimated to be used by up to two thirds of people in Australia.

Many complementary medicines are readily available and can mistakenly be considered safe when they come from 'natural' products. This is not necessarily the case, particularly if the dose is greater than that which occurs naturally in food.

Complementary medicines can cause harmful effects in some people, including severe allergic reactions.

Many complementary medicines contain active ingredients that people may not recognise. Cases of contamination have also been reported.

As a precaution, do not use herbal medications in children and if you are pregnant, attempting to become

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pregnant, or breastfeeding.

Ask your healthcare professional about the potential benefits and harms of any complementary therapy before using it.

### **Philosophies of complementary therapies**

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 trying a complementary therapy. Some of the reasons include:

- achieving and maintaining good health
- helping them perform everyday tasks
- feeling dissatisfied with conventional medical practices
- feeling dissatisfied with their doctor–patient relationships
- wanting to take charge of their own health and medical problems
- having easy access to consumer health information on the internet
- reading evidence of the benefits and safety of some complementary medicines and therapies
- feeling dissatisfied with limited success rates or adverse side effects of prescription medicines
- wanting to receive healthcare that treats the whole person and not just their symptoms (Note: both complementary healthcare practitioners and some conventional health professionals actively endorse holistic care).

The most frequent users of complementary therapies in Australia are women and those who are well educated. Many people use complementary therapies and medicines because of their cultural traditions and beliefs.

### **How to choose a complementary therapy practitioner**

Some suggestions for finding a reputable practitioner include:

- Contact the professional association for your chosen therapy and ask for a list of members in your area (for example, the **Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association**, which is the peak body for Chinese medicine, acupuncturists, herbalists and traditional remedial massage practitioners in Australia).
- Ask your doctor for a referral.
- Check the **Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) website** to see if they are

registered.

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 **GP (doctor)**
- A **pharmacist**
- **Medicines Line** Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (**1300 633 424**) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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