
Seeing a complementary health practitioner

Summary

- Some people use complementary medicine as well as conventional medical care.
 - Some complementary medicine therapies, such as osteopathy and yoga, are now widely used in Australia.
 - Complementary therapies vary in their nature, style and results. Some therapies have no scientific proof that they work. Some therapies work for some conditions, but not others.
 - A Medicare rebate is available on some complementary health practitioner visits.
 - When looking for a complementary health practitioner, ask your doctor for a recommendation and let them know about any complementary medicine therapies you are using.
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A complementary health practitioner practices complementary medicine, known as alternative therapy, alternative medicine, holistic therapy and traditional medicine. Complementary medicine includes vitamins, minerals, Chinese medicine and herbal and homeopathic products, and therapies such as acupuncture and Reiki. Some people use complementary medicine as well as conventional medical care, with complementary therapies, such as osteopathy and yoga, now widely used in Australia.

Types of complementary therapies

Complementary medicine therapies can be generally grouped into five categories, being:

- **alternative medical systems**, which are built on complete systems of theory and practice, such as homeopathic and naturopathic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda
- **mind–body interventions**, which include support groups, meditation, prayer, spiritual healing, and therapies that use creative outlets such as art, music or dance
- **biologically-based complementary therapies**, which include the use of herbs, foods, vitamins, minerals and dietary supplements
- **manipulative and body-based methods**, which include chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation and massage
- **energy therapies**, which involve the use of two types of energy fields, being bio-field therapies, such as qi-gong, Reiki and therapeutic touch, and bio-energetic therapies, involving the use of pulsed electromagnetic fields such as pulsed fields, magnetic fields or alternating-current or alternating and direct-current fields.

Effectiveness of complementary medicine

Reliable evidence about the effect of complementary therapies can be difficult to find and some therapies do not have any scientific proof that they work.

It is very important to tell your regular GP about any complementary products and therapies you are using, so they can consider how these therapies might impact on the care they are providing. Sometimes, they may advise against using a complementary therapy if there is a risk it will interfere with medication you are taking.

Finding a complementary health practitioner

Before seeking out a complementary health practitioner or therapy, think about what you want to achieve from the visit. You may hope to:

- relieve symptoms or pain
 - reduce your risk of disease or complications
 - relieve anxiety
 - achieve or maintain a healthy lifestyle.
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It is worth talking to your regular doctor (usually your GP) about how realistic your expectations are before investigating complementary medicine options. To find a complementary health practitioner, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a recommendation, or talk to family and friends.

Some complementary health practitioners are covered by a national registration and accreditation scheme, and most areas of complementary medicine have a professional association. This means they are self-regulated and have agreed standards of care. You can contact the appropriate association and ask for a list of members in your area. Complementary health practitioners work mostly in private practice and you will not need a referral from a doctor to see one.

Visiting a complementary health practitioner

As with any healthcare consultation, you can expect that your complementary health practitioner will want to know about your symptoms and medical history. They should also ask about medication and therapies you have taken in the past or are currently taking.

The practitioner may ask about some things that you do not think are connected to your main health issue, such as thoughts and emotions, sleeping patterns and eating habits, but these questions are designed to help the practitioner to get an overall picture of your health.

Many complementary health practitioners will recommend a course of treatment or complementary therapies to help with your health problems.

Questions you may wish to ask include:

- How does the treatment or therapy work?
- Could the treatment or therapy interfere with other treatment I'm having, or affect medication or supplements I'm taking?
- Are there likely to be any side effects?
- Is there any medical evidence to back up the treatment?
- How long will I need the treatment?
- How much does the treatment cost?

Paying to see a complementary health practitioner

A Medicare rebate is available for some complementary therapies, including chiropractic care and acupuncture. Ask about Medicare rebates when booking your appointment.

Some therapies may also be partly covered by your private health insurance. Check your policy or speak with your health insurer about what you are covered for. There is often a cap on the costs or number of visits you can claim in a year.

Where to get help

- Your GP
- Pharmacist

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