Complementary therapies

Summary

- Complementary therapies are systems of healthcare that treat the whole person, not just the symptoms of their disease.
- Your doctor may recommend a complementary treatment or therapy if it might be of benefit to you
- Discuss the use of any complementary medicines with your doctor in case there are any harmful effects from interactions with medications you are using or health conditions you may have.

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’, which makes it difficult to offer a blanket definition. Complementary therapies are ones used alongside conventional medical treatments.

Some therapies or modalities are based on principles that are not recognised by conventional medicine, but have an established evidence base and have been proven to work for a limited number of health conditions.

Alternative therapies are treatments that are used in place of conventional medicines or treatments. There is no scientific or medical evidence for many of these 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. Traditionally this has not been the case for complementary therapies, but in more recent times there has been a move to apply science to better understand how many complementary therapies work.

You don’t 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 or use. Herbs can sometimes interact with prescription drugs and cause side effects.

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

See also complementary therapies safety and legal issues.

Use of complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are widely used in Australia. A survey conducted by NPS MedicineWise in 2008 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, which is one reason why there is less scientific evidence available about their safety and effectiveness.

However, the increasing use of complementary therapies has begun to trigger scientific research and some complementary therapies now have some scientific evidence about their safety and effectiveness, in addition to their history of traditional use.

Sometimes, complementary therapies are less invasive and more cost-effective than conventional medical treatments. Nonetheless, it’s still important to ask your healthcare professional about the potential benefits and harms of any complementary therapy before using it.
Many natural and complementary medicines are readily available and can mistakenly be considered safe because they are natural products. However, they can still cause strong negative effects in some people, including severe allergic reactions.

Many complementary medicines have a range of active ingredients to be aware of that people may not recognise, and cases of contamination have been reported. For these reasons, it’s important to consider seeking advice from a qualified health professional before using a complementary medicine or therapy.

In general, do not use herbal medications in children and if you are pregnant, attempting to become pregnant, or breastfeeding.

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 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 your 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 healthcare 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.
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.
- Ask your doctor for a referral.
- Ask your friends for word-of-mouth recommendations.
- Check the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) website.
- 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
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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