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Complementary & Alternative Medicine (CAM)



A Guide For People With Cancer



An Educational Initiative by National Cancer Centre Singapore

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM)

A Guide For People With Cancer

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Introduction

A diagnosis of cancer can be overwhelming. You have many choices to make before, during, and after your cancer treatment. Many people will accept the advice of their doctor and seek the best conventional cancer treatment. However, some may be thinking about Complementary and Alternative Medicine. We call this CAM, for short.

You will probably receive lots of advice and information about cancer treatments and remedies, new or old. It may come from many sources – doctors, friends, family, colleagues, the internet, pamphlets, magazines, books, etc.. There is a lot of information available, and new methods for treating cancer are always being tested, so it may be hard to know where to start. Many people try CAM therapies during cancer care. CAM does not work for everyone, but some methods may help you manage stress, nausea, pain, or other symptoms or side effects.

There is much we do not know about CAM. We are learning about CAM therapies every day. Consumers may use the terms "natural," "holistic," "home remedy," or "Eastern medicine" to refer to CAM. Using the term "complementary" when meaning "alternative" or vice versa can be a source of misunderstanding and conflict. A therapy is alternative when it is used instead of conventional therapy. A therapy is complementary when it is used in addition to conventional therapy.

We hope the information from this booklet will answer some of the questions you may have. It only serves as a guide and its contents are not to be taken as medical advice. It is important to talk to your doctor before you try anything new. This will help ensure that nothing gets in the way of your cancer treatment.



If you find this booklet helpful, share it with your family and friends. And if you have any queries about the contents of this book or if there is any information you are seeking that is not covered here, please contact the Cancer Helpline at 6225 5655 for more information.

Other cancer information booklets are also available from the National Cancer Centre Singapore, Cancer Education and Information Services. Contact the Cancer Helpline to request for a copy. For electronic versions of this and other booklets, please visit National Cancer Centre Singapore's website: www.nccs.com.sg

What is Conventional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine?



When cancer is first diagnosed there is often little time or energy for thought. Apart from dealing with the emotional impact of the diagnosis, people with cancer also have to make a decision about the type of treatment they need. It's natural to want to fight your cancer in any way you can. There is a lot of information available, and new methods for treating cancer are always being tested, so it may be hard to know where to start.

Cancer treatment falls broadly into three categories: -

- Conventional or Mainstream treatment
- Complementary therapy
- Alternative therapy

Conventional or Mainstream Treatment

Conventional cancer treatment is the **standard** medical treatment for cancer. This includes surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapy and hormone treatment or clinical trials. Such treatments have undergone extensive testing through research involving thousands of patients. They have been proven to be effective and the side effects are known. Although this does not mean that they will cure all cancers, they usually provide the best treatment outcomes.

Complementary Therapy

Complementary therapy is used **along with** standard or conventional medical treatments. One example is using acupuncture to help with side effects of cancer treatment. A number of approaches can improve well-being and quality of life for people with cancer. There is no proof that such approaches can cure cancer, but they help patients cope better with their illness. Most doctors see these approaches as helpful. In treating disease, complementary therapies are not substitutes for conventional medical care; they are used concurrently with medical treatment to help alleviate stress, reduce pain and anxiety, manage symptoms, and promote a feeling of well-being.

Alternative Therapy

Alternative medicine is used **in place** of standard medical treatments. Alternative therapies are built upon complete systems of theory and practice. Often, these systems have evolved apart from and earlier than the conventional medical approach. Examples of alternative medical systems that have developed in Western cultures include homeopathic medicine and naturopathic medicine. In homeopathic therapy, symptoms are viewed as the body's attempt to adapt and restore balance.

Homeopathic remedies are remedies drawn from nature that include herbs, animal products and minerals.

Naturopathic medicine traces its roots to ancient cultures and is considered to be the oldest medicine known to man. Naturopathic medicine proposes that there is a healing power in the body that establishes, maintains, and restores health. Practitioners work with the patient with a goal of supporting this power, through treatments such as nutrition and lifestyle counselling, dietary supplements, medicinal plants, exercise, homeopathy, and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

Examples of systems that have developed in non-Western cultures include Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Ayurveda. TCM is based on a concept of balanced 'Qi', or vital energy, that is believed to flow throughout the body. 'Qi' is proposed to regulate a person's spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical balance and is influenced by the opposing forces of 'yin' (negative energy) and 'yang' (positive energy). Disease is proposed to result from the flow of 'Qi' being disrupted and 'yin' and 'yang' becoming imbalanced. Among the components of TCM are herbal and nutritional therapy, restorative physical exercises, meditation, acupuncture and remedial massage.

Ayurveda has been practiced primarily in India for 5,000 years. Ayurveda includes diet and herbal remedies and emphasizes the use of body, mind, and spirit in disease prevention and treatment.

There are varying opinions about alternative or unproven remedies. Some approaches claim to prevent cancer, slow down its growth, or cure cancer. People who promote or believe in them argue that they are an important means of treating cancer. Many doctors, on the other hand, are concerned that alternative therapies can give false hope and some are extremely expensive and sometimes may even be harmful.

It is often difficult to find comprehensive information on alternative therapy because it is not written in medical journals and books are often written by just one person. These treatments usually have little scientific basis and many have not been scientifically tested. However, physicians practicing conventional therapy do encourage new therapies where claims of efficacy are rationally examined and tested.

WHAT IS INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE?

Integrative medicine is **a total approach to care** that involves the patient's mind, body, and spirit. It combines the discipline of modern science with the wisdom of ancient healing. It uses standard medicine with CAM practices that have shown the most promise. For example, some people learn to use relaxation as a way to reduce stress during chemotherapy.

For people living with chronic or life-threatening illness, it can transform the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of their lives. Integrative medicine may also be valuable to those who are not ill but wish to increase self-awareness, enhance well-being, and prevent health-related problems.



WHY DO PEOPLE WITH CANCER CHOOSE CAM?

People look to CAM for the same reasons they look to mainstream treatments – they want a cure, to remain well and in control of their lives, they want the best quality of life possible – they want to be healed, in body and mind.

1. The Promise of a Cure

Conventional cancer treatments can never promise to cure a cancer. But many people are cured – yet many fail to respond to their treatment. Some people want to try all possibilities to stop the cancer. It may give them peace of mind to have tried everything. Some people cling to the belief that, however small the chance, the alternative therapy might work for them.



Something to consider:

- What proof is there that the remedy works? Often it is the testimony of only a few people. There is usually no way of checking these claims.
- Is there any information on the number of people who use the treatment but not get any better?

2. The promise of a natural and simple approach

Conventional cancer treatments sometimes have unpleasant side effects. Surgery can be painful and some can change your body image. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy both destroy cancer cells but in the process, they also damage some normal cells and this causes side effects.

In contrast, alternative therapy often promise an approach that is natural, simple, effective, harmless and without side effects.

Something to consider:

- What proof is there of these promises?
- Are there any side effects or complications?
- What is the failure rate?
- Were those who recovered also receiving conventional cancer treatment? If so, maybe it was the mainstream treatment that helped.

Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery and hormone therapy cannot claim to be harmless. But they are getting very much better at destroying cancer cells and leaving healthy cells unharmed. These treatments have a good chance of achieving their aim to cure or slow down cancer. There is usually something that can be done to reduce, prevent or control side effects.

3. Keeping hope alive

For some people, trying an alternative therapy is a way of keeping hope alive for a cure when nothing else is working.

Something to consider:

- Feeling hopeful is vitally important in living with cancer, both for the person with cancer and the family. To destroy that hope can leave people hurt and depressed.
- Pinning all hope on something that is unproven or not likely to work can lead to great unhappiness. It is important to bear this in mind when looking at unproven cancer remedies.
- Hope that is helpful is hope for things that may be possible and those that will meet the deepest needs of the person with cancer. For many, there will be hope for recovery or survival. For some, the hope may be for happiness, peace, moving beyond anger and despair, the company of loved ones, absence of pain and for dignity and respect.

TYPES OF CAM

There are seven major fields of practice described in a report initiated by the US Congress in 1998 to the National Institutes of Health on Alternative Medical Systems and Practices in the United States. They are:

1. Mind-body interventions
2. Energy applications in medicine
3. Alternative systems of medical practice, such as naturopathy, chiropractic, homeopathy and acupuncture
4. Manual healing methods or Manipulative and Body-Based Practices
5. Pharmacological and biological treatments not yet accepted by mainstream medicine
6. Herbal medicine
7. Treatments focusing on diet and nutrition in the prevention and treatment of chronic disease.

1. Mind-Body Medicine

Mind-body medicine uses a variety of techniques designed to enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms. Mind-body techniques that are considered CAM include meditation, prayer, mental healing, and therapies that use creative outlets such as art, music, or dance.

These are based on the belief that your mind is able to affect your body. Some examples are:

- **Meditation:** Focused breathing or repetition of words or phrases to quiet the mind;
- **Biofeedback:** Using simple machines, the patient learns how to affect certain body functions that are normally out of one's awareness (such as heart rate);
- **Hypnosis:** A state of relaxed and focused attention in which the patient concentrates on a certain feeling, idea, or suggestion to aid in healing;
- **Yoga:** Systems of stretches and poses, with special attention given to breathing;
- **Imagery:** Imagining scenes, pictures, or experiences to help the body heal;
- **Creative outlets:** Art, music, or dance.

2. Energy Applications

Energy therapies involve the use of energy fields. There are 2 types.

- a. **Biofield or putative energy fields therapies** are intended to affect energy fields that are believed to surround and penetrate the human body. The existence of such fields has not yet been scientifically proven. Some forms of energy therapy manipulate biofields by applying pressure and/ or manipulating the body by placing the hands in, or through, these fields.

Examples include:

- **Qi gong:** A component of Traditional Chinese Medicine that combines movement, meditation, and regulation of breathing to enhance the flow of 'Qi' in the body, improve blood circulation, and enhance immune function.
- **Reiki:** Balancing energy either from a distance or by placing hands on or near the patient.
- **Therapeutic touch:** Moving hands over energy fields of the body.

- b. **Bioelectromagnetic-based or veritable energy therapies** are types of energetic medicine that are based upon the theory of making corrections in human energy fields. They employ mechanical vibrations (such as sound) and electromagnetic forces, including visible light, magnetism, monochromatic radiation (such as laser beams), and rays from other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum. They involve the use of specific, measurable wavelengths and frequencies to treat patients. It is believed that a specific vibration can selectively destroy an abnormal cell while preserving normal cells.

Examples of such therapies:

- **Electroacupuncture:** uses electric current to stimulate acupuncture points. By stimulating the points with direct current administered through needles, the function of the organ is restored.
- **Laser acupuncture:** uses small, low-power laser beams on acupuncture points to stimulate energy flow. It is performed on patients who have a fear of needles. The laser beams are said to be non-damaging to skin but the consistency of the equipment has not been determined.
- **Light Therapy:** uses natural or artificial light to treat various ailments, but unproven uses of light extend to lasers, colors, and monochromatic lights. Although low-level laser therapy is claimed to be useful for relieving pain, reducing inflammation, and helping to heal wounds, strong scientific proof of these effects is still needed.

3. Alternative Systems of Medical Practice

These are healing systems and beliefs that have evolved over time in different cultures and parts of the world. Some examples are:

- **Ayurvedic medicine:** A system from India emphasizing balance among body, mind, and spirit;

- **Chinese medicine:** Based on the view that health is a balance of two forces called yin and yang. Acupuncture is a common practice in Chinese medicine that involves stimulating specific points on the body to promote health, or to lessen disease symptoms and treatment side effects;
- **Homeopathy:** Uses very small doses of substances to trigger the body to heal itself;
- **Naturopathic medicine:** Uses different methods that help the body heal itself naturally.

4. Manual Healing Methods or Manipulative and Body-Based Practices

Manipulative and body-based methods in CAM are based on manipulation and/or movement of one or more parts of the body. Some examples include chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation, and massage. Manipulative and body-based practices focus primarily on the structures and systems of the body, including the bones and joints, the soft tissues, and the circulatory and lymphatic systems.

These are based on working with one or more parts of the body. Some examples are:

- **Massage:** Manipulation of tissues with hands or special tools;
- **Chiropractic care:** A type of manipulation of the joints and skeletal system;
- **Reflexology:** Using pressure points in the hands or feet to affect other parts of the body.

5. Pharmacological or Biologically Based Practices

Pharmacological or Biologically based therapies in CAM includes but is not limited to substances found in botanicals, animal-derived extracts, vitamins, minerals, fatty acids, amino acids, proteins, prebiotics and probiotics, whole diets, and functional foods. This includes dietary supplements and herbal products. Some examples are:

- **Vitamins**
- **Herbs**
- **Foods**
- **Special diets**

A note about nutrition: It is common for people with cancer to have questions about different foods to eat during treatment. Yet it is important to know that there is no one food or special diet that has been proven to control or cure cancer. Too much of any one food is not helpful, and may even be harmful.

6. Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine is a booming industry. The use of herbs and plants to treat medical conditions dates back thousands of years. More than 120 commonly prescribed drugs are derived from plant sources. Cancer drugs such a Paclitaxel continue to show the usefulness of plants in anti-cancer treatment.

The interest in herbal remedies stems from the use of “natural” products and to avoid the side effects and toxicities of more conventional medications. However, “natural” does not necessarily mean “safe”. Herbs taken in wrong dosages or by people with conditions for which their effects are contraindicated can cause serious side effects and even death. For example, ma huang or ephedra contains ephedrine that can cause headache, dizziness, palpitations and possibly strokes and heart attacks. The consumer must interpret claims made by manufacturers and prescribers of herbal medicines carefully.



The safety of many herbs is unknown. Healthcare professionals need to be aware of the growing use of herbs by the general public to treat various ailments. Individuals who choose to use herbs for specific ailments are strongly advised to speak with healthcare professionals in order to evaluate any potential contraindications associated with medications that they may be taking or potential side effects of the herbs.

7. Treatments focusing on diet and nutrition in the prevention and treatment of chronic disease.

Much has been written about diet and its effects on health and disease. There is no one single food that can prevent and cure cancer. Alternative or special diets have evolved out of concerns about more and more people eating saturated-fat laden foods, nutrient-depleted food and diet high in protein and carbohydrates. The optimum level for nutrients is controversial. The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) is designed to provide a basis for evaluating the diet of groups – not individuals.

The use of special diets should not be taken lightly or undertaken without expert guidance. The potential for negative consequences must always be a consideration. Some examples of alternative or special diets include:

Vegetarian Diets: focus on the practice of not consuming meat, fish or poultry. Some vegetarians eat eggs and dairy products. Research has shown that a properly followed vegetarian diet can reduce the risk of colon, breast, prostate and other forms of cancer, as well as heart disease and other illnesses. A 1989 study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition reported that vegetarians eat more essential nutrients and absorb them better than non-vegetarians.

Macrobiotic Diets: Macrobiotics by definition means “large life”. It is based on the Eastern philosophy of yin and yang, which is incorporated into all aspects of the macrobiotic theory and lifestyle. Taking responsibility for individual health through a more balanced, natural way of life is the goal of macrobiotics. The basic macrobiotic diet consists of 50% - 60% whole cereal grains, 5% soup, 25%-30% vegetables, 10%-15% beans and sea vegetables, and 5%-10% fish, shellfish, seasonal fruits and nuts.

Gerson Therapy: is a dietary program consisting of large amounts of fresh, organic fruits and vegetables and emphasizing low salt intake and high amounts of potassium. The goal of this diet is to produce positive cellular change through diet and detoxification. The primary principle is the balance of sodium and potassium on the cellular level. The preparation of the food is the key of the Gerson diet. Foods are cooked over low heat and with very little water. Cooking utensils should be stainless steel, cast iron, glass, porcelain or tin. Aluminum pots and pans, microwave ovens and pressure cookers are not allowed. Coffee enema is given for detoxification. Participants are expected to follow the regimen for 2 years.





SHOULD I TRY CAM?

People have the right to choose their own treatment. However, to make an informed decision, people need to know and understand as much as possible about their cancer and its treatment. This helps them to feel in control and to make choices that are best for them.

Look carefully at the complementary and alternative treatments that you read or hear about. This may include asking questions such as:

1. What is the basis of the therapy and have the claims been tested?
2. Where have the claims been reported or does it rely on personal testimonials as evidence that the methods work?
3. How many people have taken up that particular therapy?
4. What are the qualifications of the person prescribing and administering the treatment?
5. What are the successes and where were the results published?
6. What are the possible side effects?
7. Can these effects be prevented or controlled?

If these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily, then you should be suspicious that the remedy has no proven value. Check that the therapy is solely a specific cancer treatment and not also recommended for a variety of other diseases such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, etc.

You should also consider the following:

Unhygienic Practices

Some practitioners of alternative therapy may be poorly trained, or have poor hygiene standards. This can lead to infection, which could be dangerous. There is a risk with remedies that use needles, injections, syringes or enemas. Always check the training and qualifications of people offering such methods.

Herbal Remedies

Herbal preparations used in some therapies may contain impurities, which can cause unexpected problems. Please discuss with your treating doctor if you intend to consume any herbal preparations while you are receiving conventional cancer treatment.

Cost

Some alternative therapies are very expensive. Do consider the cost and benefits of the treatment before making your decision. Find out from the practitioner the duration of the treatment and how much it would cost you to complete it.

Impulsive decisions

Sometimes a person with cancer may choose an unproven remedy as the main form of treatment and reject conventional cancer treatment. When this happens, a curable cancer may become more advanced or deteriorate if it is not appropriately managed. It is good advice to carefully consider your choices and not make hasty decisions. Talk and discuss it with your doctor.

Doctors generally understand that people with cancer will consider using alternative therapies. They also understand that medicine does not have all the answers. If you are thinking of trying an unproven or alternative therapy, it is best to talk it over with your treating doctor. Your doctor can help you: -

- distinguish between approaches that may help you and those that can cause you more harm than good.
- be aware of any side effects that these treatments may have.

Your doctor will need to know if you are using other methods as some of these therapies can interfere with mainstream or conventional treatments.

Remember, if you are well-informed and understand your treatment, this also helps your doctor. You will be better able to cope with side effects or notice any unusual signs that the doctor should be told about.

Talk with your doctor before you use CAM

Some people with cancer are afraid that their doctor won't understand or approve of the use of CAM. However, doctors know that people with cancer want to take an active part in their care. They want the best for their patients and often are willing to work with them.



Talk to your doctor to make sure that all aspects of your cancer care work together. This is important because things that seem safe may interfere with your cancer treatment.

By asking questions you have simply just asked for information. You have not attacked or doubted the conventional treatment you are receiving or the person treating you. If you do not understand the answer, ask the doctor to explain it again in a different way. Doctors often use technical words without realising it and are usually happy to explain it again if you ask. You have the right to information. Some people find it helpful to write down beforehand a list of questions to ask their doctor.

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT CAM

a. What types of CAM might:

- help me cope, reduce my stress, and feel better?
- help me feel less tired?
- help me deal with cancer symptoms, such as pain, or side effects of treatment, such as nausea?
- interfere with my treatment or medicines?

b. Why does alternative therapy work for some people?

You may have read or heard of people who claim that their cancer was cured by an alternative therapy. Most of these people may have had conventional treatment as well, often shortly before or at the same time. Conventional treatment can sometimes take weeks or months to work fully.

Sometimes, the cancer is not cured, but is still present or progressing although the person feels well in the short term. Most cancers show no symptoms of their course, which is why many people with cancer can be misled into believing they have been cured even though the cancer is still progressing. (This is the reason why doctors wait many years before saying that a cancer is cured).

Doctors cannot always predict the course of cancer. Some cancers grow and spread much faster than expected. In other cases, a person may live longer than the doctor predicted. Sometimes a cancer will simply go away, quite unexpectedly. We do not know why this happens but these people have almost always had conventional treatment. Some may have used alternative or unproven remedies, but some have not.

It is important to remember that people promoting unproven or alternative treatments often do not report such cases for whom the treatment does not work. Many such patients who had experienced unsatisfactory results to these alternative treatments also never return to their alternative medicine practitioner and these cases remain unreported.

c. What do quacks promise?

Quacks prey on people's fear of cancer. They promote treatments with no proven value. Often they offer cures that are painless or quick. Why do people fall for these sales pitches? After all, at best these treatments are worthless. At worst, they are dangerous. One reason health care scams work is that they prey on people who are frightened or in pain. Living with a chronic health problem is hard. It is easy to see why people might fall for a false promise of a quick and painless cure.

By using unproven methods, people with cancer may lose valuable time and the chance to receive a proven, effective treatment. This delay may lessen the chance for controlling or curing the disease.

d. How can I protect myself from health scams?

Be wary. Question what you see or hear in advertisements or on the internet, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations. Always check to make sure the claims in their advertisements are true. Find out about a product before you buy. Don't let a sales person force you to make a snap decision. Check with your doctor first.

Look for red flags in advertisements or promotional material that:

- Promise a quick or painless cure,
- Claim to be made from a special, secret, or ancient formula — often only available by mail or from one sponsor,
- Use testimonials or undocumented case histories from satisfied patients,
- Claim to be effective for a wide range of ailments,
- Claim to cure a disease (such as arthritis or cancer) that is not yet understood by medical science,
- Offer an additional "free" gift or a larger amount of the product as a "special promotion," or
- Require advance payment and claim limited availability of the product.

e. How do I know that my current treatment is the best for me?

It is sometimes difficult to decide on the best treatment for each person. This is because each person's cancer is different and because some treatments are still relatively new.

For most cancers, there is one course of treatment that is proven to be most successful. Doctors use their own expertise and judgment to recommend the treatment that is most suitable. They draw on the experience of other doctors and researchers, published in medical and scientific journals.

If your doctor is a specialist in cancer care, and if you are well informed about your cancer, the options for treatment and support available, you are in the best position to decide what is the best treatment for you. If you are not satisfied with your treatment or if you simply want someone else's view, you can always ask for a second opinion from another doctor.

f. Can I use CAM while I am having conventional treatment?

Many people use CAM while they are having conventional treatment and usually it does not cause any problems. However, it is important to tell your treating doctor what you are doing or intend to do. This way, you can ensure that your conventional treatment will continue to work as well as possible and not clash with the other forms of treatment that you may be receiving.

g. What if I gave up conventional treatment for alternative therapy?

You have the right to choose your treatment. However, do consider the risk of losing the benefits that conventional treatment offers. Do not make hasty decisions. Always weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each treatment before making a decision.

CHOOSE CAM PRACTITIONERS WITH CARE

General questions you can ask the CAM practitioner

- What types of CAM do you practice?
- Where did you receive your training and qualifications?
- What is your specialty?
- Have you worked with cancer patients before?
- Do you see other patients with my type of cancer?
- How many people with my particular type of cancer have you treated?

a. What questions about the therapy should I ask the CAM practitioner?

With the information obtained from asking these questions, you will be better equipped to decide on which therapy you want to take up or if it is even necessary to use one. If the practitioner cannot answer these questions to your satisfaction, then you have the grounds to be wary about the therapy offered or the practitioner offering it.

- How can this treatment help me?
- How is the treatment given?
- Do you know of studies that prove this treatment helps?
- What are the risks and side effects?
- Can the risks and side effects be prevented or treated?
- Will this interfere with my cancer treatment?
- How long will I be on the therapy?
- How long before I know the treatment is working?
- What is the success rate of this therapy?

- What evidence is there that it will work for me?
- How much will it cost?
- Do you have information on the treatment that I can read about?
- Are there any reasons why I should not use it?
- Is this same treatment being used for any other illness apart from cancer?

Questions to ask yourself

- Does the treatment sound too good to be true?
- Do I feel comfortable with this person?
- Do I like how the office looks and feels?
- Do I like the staff?
- Does this person support standard cancer treatments?
- Is it easy to get an appointment?
- Are the hours convenient for me?
- Can I afford the cost of the treatment?

GET TRUSTED INFORMATION

There is a lot of information on CAM, so it's important to go to sources you can trust. Be careful of products advertised by people or companies that:

- Make claims that they have a "cure";
- Do not give specific information about how well their product works;
- Make claims only about positive results that have few side effects;
- Say they have clinical studies, but provide no proof or copies of the studies.

Just remember, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Websites

Patients and families have been able to find answers to many of their questions about CAM on the internet. Many websites are good resources for CAM information. However, some may be unreliable or misleading.

Questions to ask about a website:

- Who runs and pays for the site?
- Does it list any credentials?
- Does it represent an organisation that is well-known and respected?
- What is the purpose of the site, and who is it for?
- Is the site selling or promoting something?
- Where does the information come from?
- Is the information based on facts or only on someone's feelings or opinions?
- How is the information chosen? Is there a review board or do experts review the content?
- How current is the information?
- Does the site tell when it was last updated?
- How does the site choose which other sites to link you to?



HOW TO EVALUATE HEALTH INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET?

The growing popularity of the internet has made it easier and faster to find health information. Much of this information is valuable; however, the internet also allows rapid and widespread distribution of false and misleading information. It is important for you to carefully consider the source of information and to discuss the information with your health care provider. The questions and answers below can help you decide whether the health information you find on the internet is likely to be reliable.

1. Who runs the website?

Any website should make it easy for people to learn who is responsible for the site and its information. On the National Cancer Centre Singapore website, for example, the NCCS logo is clearly noted on every major page, along with a link to the site's home page.

2. Who pays for the website?

It costs money to run a website. The source of a website's funding should be clearly stated. For example, web addresses ending in ".gov" are government-sponsored sites, ".edu" indicates educational institutions, ".org" is often used by non-commercial organisations, and ".com" denotes commercial organisations. The source of funding can affect what content is presented, how the content is presented, and what the owners want to accomplish on the site.

3. What is the purpose of the website?

The purpose of the website is related to who runs and pays for it. Many websites have a link to information about the site. The link, which is often called "About This Site," should clearly state the purpose of the site and help users evaluate the trustworthiness of the information on the site.

4. What is the original source of the information on the website?

Many health and medical websites post information collected from other web sites or sources. If the person or organisation in charge of the site did not write the material, the original source should be clearly identified.

5. How is the information on the website documented?

In addition to identifying the original source of the material, the site should identify the evidence on which the material is based. Medical facts and figures should have references (such as citations of articles in medical journals). Also, opinions or advice should be clearly set apart from information that is "evidence-based" (that is, based on research results).

6. How current is the information on the website?

Web sites should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. It is particularly important that medical information be current, and that the most recent update or review date be clearly posted. Even if the information has not changed, it is helpful to know that the site owners have reviewed it recently to ensure that the information is still valid.

7. How does the website choose links to other sites?

Reliable websites usually have a policy about how they establish links to other sites. Some medical websites take a conservative approach and do not link to any other sites; some link to any site that asks or pays for a link; others link only to sites that have met certain criteria.

8. What information about users does the website collect, and why?

Many health-related websites ask the user to “subscribe” or “become a member.” Any website asking users for personal information should explain exactly what the site will and will not do with the information. Users should be certain they read and understand any privacy policy or similar language on the site, and not sign up for anything they do not fully understand.

9. How does the website manage interactions with users?

There should always be a way for users to contact the website owners with problems, feedback, and questions. If the site hosts a chat room or other online discussion areas, it should tell users about the terms of using the service. Is the service moderated? If so, by whom, and why? It is always a good idea to spend time reading the discussion without joining in, to feel comfortable with the environment before becoming a participant.

10. How can people verify the accuracy of information they receive via e-mail?

Any e-mail messages should be carefully evaluated. The origin of the message and its purpose should be considered. Some companies or organizations use e-mail to advertise products or attract people to their websites. The accuracy of health information may be influenced by the desire to promote a product or service.

Books

A number of books have been written about different CAM therapies. Some books contain trustworthy content, while others do not. It is important to know that information is always changing and that new research results are reported every day. Be aware that if only one person writes a book, you may only be getting that one person's view.

Questions to ask:

- Is the author an expert on this subject?
- Do you know anyone else who has read the book?
- Has the book been reviewed by other experts?
- Was it published in the past 5 years?
- Does the book offer different points of view, or does it seem to hold one opinion?
- Has the author researched the topic in full?
- Are the references listed in the back?

Magazine Articles

If you want to look for articles you can trust, ask your librarian to help you look for medical journals, books, and other research that has been done by experts.

Articles in popular magazines are usually not written by experts. Rather, the authors speak with experts, gather information, and then write the article. If claims about CAM are made in magazine articles, remember:

- The authors may not have expert knowledge in this area;
- They may not say where they found their information;
- The articles have not been reviewed by experts;
- The publisher may have ties with advertisers or other organisations. Therefore, the article may be one-sided.

When you read these articles, you can use the same process that the magazine writer uses:

- Speak with experts;
- Ask lots of questions;
- Then decide if the therapy is right for you.

DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS -- MORE THAN VITAMINS...

Today's dietary supplements are not only vitamins and minerals. They also include other less familiar substances, such as herbals, botanicals, amino acids, and enzymes. Dietary supplements come in a variety of forms, such as tablets, capsules, powders, energy bars, or drinks.



Dietary supplements are not intended to treat, diagnose, prevent, or cure diseases; therefore, manufacturers may not make such claims. In some cases, dietary supplements may have unwanted effects, especially if taken before surgery or with other dietary supplements or medicines, or if you have certain health conditions.

Scientific evidence supporting the benefits of some dietary supplements is well established for certain health conditions, but others need further study. It is the responsibility of dietary supplement manufacturers/ distributors to ensure that their products are safe and that the claims on their labels are accurate and truthful. Whatever your choice, supplements should not replace prescribed medications or the variety of foods important to a healthy diet.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are dietary supplements?

Dietary supplements (also called nutritional supplements, or supplements for short):

- are taken by mouth.
- contain a "dietary ingredient" intended to supplement the diet. Examples of dietary ingredients include vitamins, minerals, herbs (as single herbs or mixtures), other botanicals, amino acids, and dietary substances such as enzymes and substances made from glands of animals.
- come in different forms, such as tablets, capsules, softgels, gelcaps, liquids, and powders.
- are not represented for use as a conventional food or as a sole item of a meal or the diet.
- are labelled as being a dietary supplement.

2. Does "natural" always mean "safe"?

There are many supplements, as well as many prescription drugs, that come from natural sources and are both useful and safe. However, "natural" does not always mean "safe" or "without harmful effects." For example, consider mushrooms that grow in the wild - some are safe to eat, while others are poisonous. Some of these supplements could damage health - and in some cases severely or interact dangerously with prescription drugs.

3. What's in the bottle does not always match what's on the label.

A supplement might:

- not contain the correct ingredient (plant species). For example, one study that analyzed 59 preparations of echinacea found that about half did not contain the species listed on the label.
- contain higher or lower amounts of the active ingredient. For example, in a study by the National Centre of Complementary and Alternative Medicine, USA on ginseng products found that most contained less than half the amount of ginseng listed on their labels.
- be contaminated because of unhygienic manufacturing practices.

4. If I am interested in using a supplement as CAM, how can I do so safely?

For your own safety, it is important to talk to your doctor about the supplement if you:

- a. are thinking about replacing your regular medical care with one or more supplements.
- b. are taking any medications (whether prescription or over-the-counter). Some supplements have been found to interact with medications. For example,
 - ginseng can increase the stimulant effects of caffeine (as in coffee, tea, and cola). It can also lower blood sugar levels, creating the possibility of problems when used with diabetes drugs.
 - ginkgo, taken with anticoagulant or antiplatelet drugs, can increase the risk of bleeding. It is also possible that ginkgo might interact with certain psychiatric drugs and with certain drugs that affect blood sugar levels.
 - St. John's wort can increase the effects of prescription drugs used to treat depression. It can also interfere with drugs used to treat HIV infection, to treat cancer, for birth control, or to prevent the body from rejecting transplanted organs.
- c. have a chronic medical condition.
- d. are planning to have surgery. Certain supplements may increase the risk of bleeding or affect anaesthetics and painkillers.
- e. are pregnant or nursing a baby.
- f. are thinking about giving a child a supplement. Many products being marketed for children have not been tested for their safety and effectiveness in children.

Do not take a higher dose of a supplement than what is listed on the label, unless your health care provider advises you to do so. Supplements and drugs can interact. If you experience any side effects, stop taking the supplement, and contact your doctor.

5. What should I know before using dietary supplements?

Be savvy! Follow these tips before buying a dietary supplement:

- a. **Safety First.** Some supplement ingredients, including nutrients and plant components, can be toxic based on their activity in your body. Do not substitute a dietary supplement for a prescription medicine or therapy.
- b. **Think twice about chasing the latest headline.** Sound health advice is generally based on research over time, not a single study touted by the media. Be cautious of results claiming a "quick fix" that does not have scientific evidence and established dietary guidance.
- c. **Is the product worth the money?** Resist the pressure to buy a product or treatment "on the spot." Some supplement products may be expensive or may not provide the benefit you expect. For example, excessive amounts of water-soluble vitamins, like vitamin C and B vitamins, not used by the body are eliminated in the urine. Be sure to talk with your healthcare team to help you determine what is best for your overall health.
- d. **The term "natural" doesn't always mean safe.** Do not assume that this term ensures wholesomeness or safety. For some supplements, "natural" ingredients may interact with medicines and can be dangerous for people with certain health conditions, or harmful in high doses. For example, tea made from peppermint leaves is generally considered safe to drink, but peppermint oil (extracted from the leaves) is much more concentrated and can be toxic if used incorrectly.
- e. **Learn to Spot False Claims.** Although the benefits of some dietary supplements have been documented, the claims of others may be unproven. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Here are some signs of a false claim:
 - **Quick and effective "cure-all."** For example, "Extremely beneficial in treatment of rheumatism, arthritis, infections, prostate problems, ulcers, cancer, heart trouble, hardening of the arteries, and more."
 - **Can treat or cure disease.** For example: "shrinks tumors" or "cures impotency." Actually, these are drug claims and should not be used for dietary or herbal supplements.
 - **Promotions that use words like "scientific breakthrough," "miraculous cure," "exclusive product," "secret ingredient," or "ancient remedy."** For example: "A scientific breakthrough formulated by using proven principles of natural health-based medical science."
 - **Statements that claim the product is "totally safe," "all natural," or has "definitely no side effects."**
 - **Limited availability, "no-risk, money-back guarantees," or requires advance payment.** For example: "Hurry. This offer will not last. Send us a cheque now to reserve your supply."

HERBAL SUPPLEMENTS

Herbal supplements are a type of dietary supplement that contain herbs, either alone or in mixtures. Herb, also called a botanical, is a plant or plant part used for its scent, flavor, and/ or therapeutic properties.

Many herbs have a long history of use and of claimed health benefits. However, some herbs have caused health problems for users. It is important to know that just because a herbal supplement is labelled "natural" does not mean it is safe or without any harmful effects.



Below are some important points to take note of:

1. Herbal supplements can act in the same way as drugs. Therefore, they can cause medical problems if not used correctly or if taken in large amounts. In some cases, people have experienced negative effects even though they followed the instructions on the label.
2. Women who are pregnant or nursing should be especially cautious about using herbal supplements, since these products can act like drugs. This caution also applies to treating children with herbal supplements.
3. It is important to consult your health care provider before using any herbal supplement, especially if you are taking any medications (whether prescription or over-the-counter). Some herbal supplements are known to interact with medications in ways that cause health problems. Even if your doctor does not know about a particular supplement, he can access the latest medical guidance on its uses, risks, and interactions.
4. The active ingredient(s) in many herbs and herbal supplements are not known. There may be dozens, even hundreds, of such compounds in one herbal supplement. Identifying the active ingredients in herbs and understanding how herbs affect the body are important research areas.
5. There has been an increase in the number of websites that sell and promote herbal supplements on the internet. It is important to know how to evaluate the claims that are made for supplements.

Important points to remember:

- **Do not self diagnose any health condition.** Work with your health care providers to determine how best to achieve optimal health.
- Check with your doctor before taking a supplement, especially when combining or substituting them with other foods or medicine.
- Some supplements can help you meet your daily requirements for certain nutrients, but others may cause health problems.
- Dietary or herbal supplements are not intended to treat, diagnose, prevent, cure disease, or to replace the variety of foods important to a healthy diet.

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- National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine: www.nccam.nih.gov
- The Cancer Nutrition Centre: www.cancernutrition.com
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA): www.fda.gov
- Quackwatch, Inc. is a nonprofit corporation making information available to combat health-related frauds, myths, fads, and fallacies: www.quackwatch.org



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