

Tips for Talking About Complementary and Alternative Medicine



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Like many people, you may be using or considering trying some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). If so, it is a good idea to talk about it with your doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers. This fact sheet explains why it's important and offers some tips to help you get the conversation started.

Key Points

- Tell all your health care providers about all the complementary and alternative therapies you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.
- Be proactive. Don't wait for your health care providers to ask about your use of complementary and alternative approaches.
- When you talk with your health care providers, make the most of the conversation. Bring a list of all prescription and over-the-counter medications and complementary and alternative therapies you use, keep a record of the information you receive, and ask questions if something is unclear.

About Complementary and Alternative Medicine

The terms **complementary** and **alternative** refer to health-related products and practices that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine. Complementary medicine is used **together with** conventional medicine, and alternative medicine is used **in place of** conventional medicine. Conventional medicine is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) or D.O. (doctor of osteopathic medicine) degrees and by their allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists, pharmacists, and registered nurses. Some health care providers practice both complementary and conventional medicine in what is known as integrative medicine.

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Examples of complementary and alternative practices and products include mind and body interventions, such as acupuncture, meditation, spinal manipulation, and massage therapy, and natural products, such as herbal and botanical products, folk medicines, homeopathic remedies, and probiotics.

Reasons for Talking With Your Health Care Providers About CAM

- Some complementary or alternative approaches can have an effect on conventional medicines. For example:
 - The herb St. John’s wort can decrease the effectiveness of many conventional drugs, including some anti-cancer drugs, the heart medication digoxin, some HIV drugs like indinavir, cyclosporine (which prevents the body from rejecting transplanted organs), and birth control pills.
 - The herb yohimbe can increase blood pressure in people who are taking some types of antidepressant drugs.
 - Vigorous or deep tissue forms of massage therapy can be harmful to people who are taking blood-thinning medications such as warfarin.
- Some complementary or alternative products or practices can be unsafe for people with certain medical conditions. For example, certain types of yoga poses (those that involve an upside-down position) are harmful for people who have glaucoma, and certain herbs, such as chamomile and echinacea, may make allergy symptoms worse in people who are allergic to ragweed.
- Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers can help you decide whether a particular product or practice is right for you. They can answer questions, suggest reliable sources of information, and point out potential benefits and risks. Talking with all of your health care providers about your use of complementary or alternative therapies will help ensure coordinated and safe care.
- You are an important part of a team that includes all of the health care providers you rely on to manage your health. Giving your team a complete picture of everything you do to take care of your health makes them your fully informed partners—and it helps **you** stay in control of your own health care.

Tips for Talking With Your Health Care Providers About CAM

- Don’t wait for your health care providers to ask about your use of complementary and alternative therapies. **Be proactive**—start the conversation.
- Keep a current list of all of your medical conditions and your therapies and treatments, including over-the-counter and prescription medicines and any products such as herbal and dietary supplements that you take. Also list any other complementary or alternative practices you use, such as meditation, acupuncture, or massage therapy. Note any medical specialists or other practitioners you see. Take the list with you whenever you visit a health care provider. Be sure to tell all your health care providers about all of your medical conditions, therapies, and treatments. Also include all medical conditions, therapies, and treatments on any patient history forms you fill out.

- Gather information on the complementary or alternative therapy you're interested in. The resources listed below (see "For More Information") are a good place to start. You may want to take the information with you; that way, you and your health care provider can reference them as you talk, and your health care provider can help you evaluate the information.
- Make a list of the things you want to talk about. For example, if you're considering taking an herbal supplement, you might include:
 - Why I want to take the supplement
 - How I found out about it
 - Is it safe for me to take?
 - Can it cause problems for me because of my medical conditions?
 - Will it interact with any of my medications?
 - Is it likely to help me?
 - What else should I know about it? Where can I find reliable information?
 - Should I try this? If not, why not? Might something else be better?
- Take a notepad or recording device with you. Listen carefully and keep a record of what you find out. You may want to ask a family member or friend to accompany you, so you can compare notes after your visit.
- If something is unclear to you, or if you want more information, don't be afraid to ask. Your health care providers may not be able to answer every question, but they can help you find the answers.

Selected References

Be an active member of your health care team. U.S. Food and Drug Administration Web site. Accessed at <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/ucm079487.htm> on January 19, 2011.

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For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) Clearinghouse provides information on CAM and NCCAM, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: nccam.nih.gov

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

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