

Complementary and Alternative Therapy



This Information Sheet looks at what a complementary or alternative therapy is and provides some questions you may wish to consider when making a decision around their usefulness in your health situation. It also lists some complementary therapies that some people have found helpful when used along with medical treatment. There is a useful list of websites and books available on the subject at the end of this Sheet.

Is it safe and can it help?

The use and acceptance of complementary therapies in New Zealand is on the increase. It is estimated that more than 60 percent of New Zealanders use complementary therapies at least once a year. With increasing numbers of products and treatments offered to the public, it is difficult to know what is safe and what is likely to help.

It is important to understand what a conventional treatment is and how it differs from a complementary or an alternative therapy.

A proven or conventional treatment is an evidence-based medical treatment that has been tested following a strict set of guidelines and found to be safe and effective. The results of these studies have been published in reputable medical journals.

Complementary therapy is a term used to describe any treatment or therapy that is not part of the conventional treatment of a disease.

A complementary therapy can be, for example, meditation to reduce stress, peppermint tea for nausea. These treatments may help control symptoms and improve wellbeing.

Alternative therapy is a term used to describe any treatment or therapy that may be used as an alternative to conventional treatments.

Alternative therapies are sometimes promoted as cancer cures. However, they are unproven, as they have not been scientifically tested, or if tested they were found to be ineffective. If used instead of evidence-based treatment, the patient may suffer either from no improvement in symptoms, or because the alternative therapy is actually harmful.

Many people with cancer use one or more kinds of alternative or complementary therapies. These may include high-dose vitamins, or herbal preparations. Often people are reluctant to tell their doctors about their decision. It is important to let your doctor know if you are taking any complementary or alternative therapies because some treatments may be harmful if they are taken at the same time as conventional treatments.

The best approach is to look carefully at your choices. Talk to your doctor about any method you are considering. There are many complementary therapies you can safely use along with standard proven medical treatment to help relieve symptoms or side-effects, to ease pain, and to help you enjoy life more, for example:

- Support groups
- Meditation
- Aromatherapy
- Art therapy
- Biofeedback
- Massage therapy
- Prayer, spiritual practices
- Tai Chi
- Yoga.

If you are thinking of using complementary or alternative therapies instead of evidence-based medical therapies here are some questions to consider when making your treatment decisions:

- What claims are made for the treatment: to cure the cancer or to enable the evidence-based treatment to work better? To relieve symptoms or side effects?
- What are the qualifications of those offering the treatment? Are they recognised experts in cancer treatment? Have they published their findings in trustworthy journals?
- How is the method promoted? Is it promoted only in the mass media (books, magazines, TV and radio talk shows) rather than in scientific journals?
- What are the costs of the therapy?
- Does the therapy promise a cure for all cancers?
- Are you told not to use conventional medical treatment?
- Is the therapy or drug a 'secret' that only certain providers can give?
- Does the therapy require you to travel to another country?
- Do the promoters attack the medical/scientific establishment?

Reputable Sources of Information about Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Cancer-Specific Sites

- American Cancer Society:
<http://www.cancer.org>
- Cancer Backup
<http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk/treatments>
click on Complementary therapies
- CancerHelpUK: www.cancerhelp.org.uk

- National Cancer Institute:
www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/therapy/CAM
- British Columbia Cancer Agency:
<http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/>
click on "Unconventional Therapies" in Patient/Public Info
- MD Anderson Cancer Center
Complementary/Integrative Medicine:
www.mdanderson.org/departments/CIMER
- Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center
www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/1979.cfm

Complementary and Alternative Therapies General Information

- National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
<http://www.nccam.nih.gov/>

Australasian Sites

- Cam.org.nz – an evidence-based resource about complementary and alternative medicine from the NZ Guidelines Group and Ministry of Health.
www.cam.org.nz
- CompleMED Centre for Complementary Medicine Research, University of Western Sydney:
<http://apps.uws.edu.au/research/complemed/>

The above web sites are not maintained by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. While we only suggest sites we believe offer credible and responsible information, we cannot guarantee that the information on the suggested web sites is correct, up-to-date or evidenced-based medical information.

We suggest that you discuss any information you find with your cancer care health professionals.

Books

- *American Cancer Society's Guide to Complementary and Alternative Cancer Methods Handbook*. American Cancer Society 2002.
- Cassileth, Barrie R. et al. *PDQ Integrative Oncology: Complementary Therapies in Cancer Care*. USA: B.C. Decker Inc, 2005.