

Complementary and alternative therapies: making an informed decision

An information sheet for people with cancer, their families and friends.

This information sheet is for people with cancer and their family and friends who want to know more about complementary and alternative therapies.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) are terms often used to refer to a large range of health care practices and products considered outside of mainstream conventional medicine.

Some people who have cancer may try complementary or alternative therapies in the hope that it will help them to cope better with cancer and treatment, or that it might help treat their cancer. When making decisions about any of these types of therapies, it is important to be fully informed and to seek the advice of your doctor.

Many complementary and alternative therapies have not been scientifically tested, which is why they are often referred to as unproven. If you are considering complementary and alternative therapies, we respect your right to explore other therapies and to make your own decision.

The aim of this information sheet is to help you make a safe and informed decision. For information about specific therapies, call the **Cancer Council Helpline** on **13 11 20** or see the web pages listed on page 4.



Understanding the terms

It is important that you understand the differences between the types of treatment you hear about.

Conventional treatments are those that are widely accepted and practised by the mainstream medical community, such as GPs and medical specialists.

These treatments have usually been tested and proven in clinical trials involving many thousands of people. Their benefits and side-effects are well known. The main conventional treatments for cancer are chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery, immune therapies and hormone therapy. These treatments, which are also called medical, orthodox or mainstream therapies, are prescribed by GPs, oncologists and other medical specialists.

Complementary therapies are used in conjunction with conventional treatments to improve wellbeing and are unlikely to do any harm.

They do not cure the cancer but may help you cope better and feel as well as possible.

There are many complementary therapies that you can safely use along with your conventional treatment to relieve pain and side-effects and to promote a sense of wellbeing.

One example of a complementary therapy is relaxation therapy. Relaxation therapy refers to a range of practices and techniques aimed at reducing stress and calming the body and mind. Other complementary therapies include acupuncture, yoga and meditation, aromatherapy, and art and music therapy.

Alternative therapies are used instead of conventional treatments and some are dangerous.

Many claim to stop cancer growth and to cure cancer. Most of these therapies have not been scientifically tested, so there is no proof that they work and their side-effects are not always known. They are often very expensive.

An example of an alternative therapy would be when a cancer patient decides to go on a special diet, such as drinking large amounts of fruit and vegetable juices, instead of having chemotherapy, surgery or radiotherapy as recommended by their medical specialist. You may have heard of other alternative therapies including shark cartilage, laetrile, spiritual healing, ozone therapy, herbal treatments, taking large doses of vitamin supplements and coffee enemas. Alternative therapies are also sometimes called unproven, integrative, holistic, unconventional or non-traditional treatments.

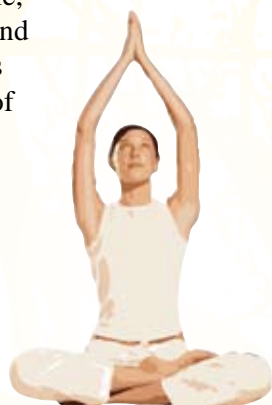
I want to know more about alternative treatments.

I have done and am doing everything my doctors tell me to, but I need to know I have tried everything.

Why do people use these therapies?

Complementary therapies such as relaxation, meditation, massage therapy and acupuncture can help deal with the emotional and physical impact of the disease and treatment side-effects.

Some cancer patients try alternative therapies because they prefer natural therapies. Others may use alternative therapies even if they know there is no scientific proof – to know they have tried every available option. Often family and friends persuade the person with cancer to try alternative therapies – anything that provides hope of a cure and a longer life. For some people, choosing complementary and alternative therapies makes them feel more in control of their treatment.



Working with your doctor

Sometimes people can feel uncomfortable talking to doctors about different approaches to cancer treatment. They may fear their doctor or nurse will disapprove or that it is not important for them to know.

You and your doctor need to work as a team to manage your cancer and its treatment. It is important to talk to your doctor if you are thinking about trying any complementary and alternative therapy, even if you don't think it can do you harm.

Some alternative therapies can be harmful when used in combination with conventional therapy. Therefore, it is important that the doctor, nurses and pharmacist are aware of all treatments you are undertaking.

Talking to your doctor means they can warn you if the therapy will interfere with your conventional treatment. They can also try to make sure the therapy isn't doing you any harm.

It is also important to tell the nurses at your treatment centre if you are using complementary and alternative therapies.

Some points to remember when talking to your doctor or nurse:

- Before talking to your doctor/nurse write down a list of questions to take to your appointment.
- If possible, take someone to your appointments. Taking a family member, friend or carer can be like having a second pair of ears.
- Talk openly about the treatment approaches you are considering and why. This helps your doctor better understand your concerns. It is your decision and consulting with your doctor doesn't mean you are asking permission. But keeping your doctor informed will help them to provide the best care for you.
- Listen to what your doctor has to say.
- Understand that your doctor may have a good reason to advise against a certain type of treatment – such as questions about its safety or concerns about interactions with other treatments.
- Even if you decide to pursue a therapy approach against your doctor's advice then let them know. This way it can be noted in your chart and taken into consideration when considering other treatments.



Key questions to ask

There are many issues to think about and questions to ask yourself when deciding whether to try a complementary and alternative product or therapy. You can use the checklist below.

- What is the therapy and how can it help me?
- What are the side-effects or risks?
- What are the practitioner's qualifications?
- Are they a member of a professional association?
- What is the practitioner's experience of treating people with my type of cancer?
- How many other people with cancer have used this therapy? Can I talk to them?
- Has the therapy been tested in clinical trials?
- Have the findings been published and are they available for me to read?
- How much does the therapy cost and can I afford it?
- Has this product been approved by Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration and for what purpose?
- Can this therapy be combined with my conventional treatment?
- How long should I have the therapy and how will I know if it is working?
- Under what conditions was the therapy prepared (for example, in 'backyard factories' there may be no infection control procedures and no ingredient monitoring).

Making decisions

A diagnosis of cancer and cancer treatment can result in various decisions you need to make. Some people may be faced with making a decision about trying an alternative or complementary therapy. When considering an alternative or complementary therapy, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- How long do I have to make the decision?
- What information do I have about the therapy?
- Do I need further information?
- What are the known benefits (that have been identified in clinical research) and the harms of the therapy?
- In choosing a therapy, what is important to me?
- Are there other people involved in making the decision or who I can talk to?

When making a decision it may be helpful to talk to a member of your health care team. You can also contact the **Cancer Council Helpline** on **13 11 20** to talk with a trained staff member about the decision you are facing.

Are these therapies safe?

Just because a substance is natural doesn't mean it is safe. For example, some herbs used in alternative remedies are listed as poisons in the government's drugs and poison schedule.

Some complementary and alternative therapies may interfere with your conventional treatment or may be harmful when used with conventional treatment.

Advice on nutrition

Eating nutritious food will help you to keep as well as possible during treatment. However, there are no special foods, diets or vitamin supplements that have been scientifically proven to cure cancer or to stop it from coming back.

Many alternative dietary treatments, particularly those that cut out food groups such as meat or dairy products, may not provide enough energy (kilojoules) and protein. This can cause unwanted weight loss, tiredness and decrease your immune function.



If you are considering making a dramatic change to your diet, talk to your dietitian or doctor first. Your dietitian can also give you advice on food to eat during and after cancer treatment so you stay as well as possible.

For more information, call the Cancer Council Helpline for a copy of the free booklet 'Understanding Nutrition'.

Warning bells

Be wary of any alternative practitioner or remedy that involves the following situations:

- The treatment claims to cure all cancers.
- The practitioner tells you not to have conventional medical treatment, or that medical treatment will stop the alternative treatment working.
- You have to travel to a different country to have the treatment.
- The alternative remedy is a 'secret', which only certain practitioners can provide.
- The treatment costs a lot of money.
- The practitioner has no qualifications.



For more information

For more information, either about how to make a decision about complementary and alternative therapies or specific remedies, talk to your doctor, treatment centre nurse, dietitian or hospital pharmacist, or call the **Cancer Council Helpline** on **13 11 20**.



Useful websites

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm

This website provides information about a range of herbs, botanicals and other products frequently used in alternative therapies.

US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine www.nccam.nih.gov


This website provides specific information on the types and uses of different complementary and alternative therapies and offers guidance when making decisions about these therapies.

Therapeutic Goods Administration www.tga.gov.au

This website is an Australian Government service which provides up-to-date information on therapeutic goods available in Australia.

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Cancer Council Helpline is a service of the Cancer Council Queensland. It is a telephone information and support service for people affected by cancer. It is a confidential service where you can talk about your concerns and needs with trained health professionals. The staff can send you written information and put you in touch with appropriate services in your own area. You can call the **Cancer Council Helpline** on **13 11 20**, Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, for the cost of a local call.

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