



Selecting a CAM Provider

Selecting the right health care provider for any complementary, alternative or conventional treatment is an extremely important decision. If you are considering any CAM therapy, speak with your primary care physician about the treatment you are considering.

Below are some general tips for finding a provider and deciding if a particular treatment is right for you:

- Compile a list of providers and find as much information as you can about each before making an appointment. Ask about each provider's credentials, practice and training—as well as licenses or certifications.
- Ask how much the therapy you are considering will cost. Check with your insurance company to see if they will cover the cost of the therapy.

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Complementary and Alternative Medicine

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), a center of the National Institutes of Health, defines complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not considered to be a part of conventional medicine. While some of these therapies have been proven safe, questions still remain about the effectiveness of most CAM therapies.

Complementary and alternative medicine differ from each other. The therapies are classified as follows:

Complementary therapies are those that are used *in conjunction with* conventional medicine. An example of complementary medicine is using aromatherapy to help alleviate a patient's discomfort after surgery.

Alternative therapies are those that are used *instead of* conventional medicine. Using a special diet to treat cancer rather than undergoing traditional treatments is an example of alternative medicine.

NCCAM classifies CAM therapies into five categories:

1. *Alternative medical systems* – These systems are built upon theory and practice, and have often evolved separately from (and much earlier than) conventional medical practices used in the United States. Examples include homeopathic medicine, naturopathic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and ayurveda (traditional Indian medicine.)

2. *Mind-body interventions* – These are techniques designed to enhance the mind's ability to impact bodily functions and symptoms. Many mind-body techniques have become mainstream therapies, including patient support groups and cognitive behavioral therapy. Other mind-body techniques such as prayer, meditation or art therapy are still considered CAM therapies.

3. *Biologically based therapies* – Biological therapies use natural substances like herbs, foods and vitamins. Examples include using dietary supplements and other products that are

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deemed “natural.”

4. *Manipulative and body-based methods* – These use manipulation or movement of body parts as a means to treat a condition. Examples include chiropractic or osteopathic manipulation and massage therapy.



5. *Energy therapies* – Procedures based on the use of energy fields to treat disease are classified in two ways:

- Biofield therapies attempt to affect energy fields that surround the body. Some practitioners of biofield therapy use their hands to penetrate the fields, although the existence of these fields has not been scientifically proven. Examples include qi gong, reiki, and therapeutic touch.
- Bioelectromagnetic-based therapies involve the unconventional use of electromagnetic fields, such as pulsed, magnetic, or alternative or direct current. ◇

Appropriate Medical Tests

Most medical decisions are made without the participation of a fully informed patient. While physicians are increasingly involving their patients in decisions about tests and treatment, many still do not embrace the practice. Ideally, a doctor needs to provide the pros and cons of any test prescribed, as well as information about all of the options and any potential side effects, consequences or dangers.

If you do not understand what a particular test is for, or how it will help you, the Agency for Health Care Quality and Research suggests asking your doctor the following:

- How is the test performed?
- What kind of information will it provide?
- Is this test the only way to find out that information?
- What are the benefits and the risks of taking this test?
- How accurate is the test?
- How should I prepare for the test?
- How long will it take to get the results and how will I be informed of the results?
- What is the next step after the test? ◇

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- After you select a provider, make a list of questions to ask during your first visit. You may want to bring a friend or a family member who can help you ask questions and record the answers.
- Bring your health history with you on your first visit—including injuries, surgeries and major illnesses—along with any medications (including over-the-counter), vitamins, or other supplements you take.
- Assess the first visit and decide if the provider is right for you. Did you feel comfortable? Could the provider answer your questions? Does the treatment plan seem reasonable?

For more information on specific CAM therapies, visit the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a division of the National Institutes of Health, at nccam.nih.gov. ◇

