

Choosing complementary medicine

Many Australians choose to use complementary medicine (CM) to address their health and wellbeing needs. Like any decision concerning your health, the decision to use CM should be made after careful consideration and with the use of good information.

The National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM) has developed a number of Fact Sheets to assist you in your decision making. They provide basic information, answers to frequently asked questions, issues to consider, and sources for further information.

Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. If you are unsure about any answers or uncomfortable with your understanding of some of the issues, talk to a healthcare professional, such as your doctor, pharmacist, community health nurse or complementary medicine healthcare practitioner.

What is complementary medicine?

There is no internationally agreed definition of complementary medicine as it means different things in different cultures. In Australia, CM is a term generally used to encompass a diverse range of therapies and health products that aim to prevent, treat or manage illness. The term CM is often used interchangeably with traditional, holistic, natural or alternative medicine and other variations.

Some CM therapies offer a complete system of diagnosis and treatment such as Chinese, Ayurvedic and Unani medicine. These particular CM disciplines describe health, illness and the healing process in their own unique way which is significantly different from conventional medicine in the terms used, approaches taken and underlying philosophy. Other CM approaches combine Western medical understanding and diagnostic techniques together with their own unique approaches e.g. chiropractic, naturopathy and Western herbal medicine. Overall, most CM therapies complement conventional medical practices instead of being substitutes or alternatives e.g. meditation, yoga and massage therapy.

Therapies and products included under the umbrella of CM can vary from country to country and may develop with time, depending on whether a particular practice or product is adopted as part of mainstream healthcare practice. For example, in many Asian countries traditional Chinese medicine is part of mainstream healthcare and is regarded as conventional whereas in Australia, Chinese medicine is considered as CM.

Complementary medicine may be practiced by conventional healthcare practitioners such as medical doctors, registered nurses, and physiotherapists as well as by practitioners with relevant CM qualifications. However, in choosing a practitioner you should be alert to practitioners that have little or no specific training or registration in CM (see *Choosing a Complementary Medicine Practitioner Fact Sheet*). Some CM treatments can be used as part of a person's self care such as the use of over-the-counter CM products. Before choosing a product off the shelf, there are several factors to consider (see Section: *Things to consider before using CM*)

Examples of complementary medicine

The list of CM therapies and products included in the following table is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather provide an indication of the main forms of CM and their basic approach to health.

CM includes the principal CM disciplines such as acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy and osteopathy. It also includes long-established and traditional systems of healthcare such as Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine and therapies which are most often used to complement conventional medicine such as manipulative and mind-body practices including massage, counselling, hypnotherapy and meditation. Other therapies include Bach and other flower remedies, crystal therapy and radionics.

Complementary Medicine Therapies and Products

Approaches	Examples
Biologically based practices	Herbal medicines, vitamins and minerals, other nutrient and non-nutrient substances (including aromatherapy) derived from animal, plant and marine sources. Examples include: fish oils, glucosamine, phytoestrogens, Coenzyme Q10, and tea polyphenols.
Mind-body therapies	Meditation, hypnosis, relaxation therapy, support groups and counselling, music therapy, spiritual healing (including prayer).
Manipulative and body-based practices	Acupuncture, chiropractic, therapeutic massage, osteopathy, reflexology, tai chi, yoga, shiatsu, exercise.
Energy therapies	Reiki, Qigong, electromagnetic field therapy.
Traditional and holistic medical systems	Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic medicine, Kampo medicine, naturopathy, anthroposophical medicine, homoeopathy.

Things to consider before using complementary medicine

Gather information on the CM therapy or product that interests you. Consider the accuracy of the information, how up to date it is and whether it comes from a reliable source. Scientific studies about the safety and effectiveness of the treatment are important to consider in addition to traditional information.

People are increasingly turning to the internet as a source of health information. While the internet provides access to a massive amount of useful information, it also leads users to information of questionable quality. NICM has identified a range of international and Australian sites that provide information on CM under the health information section of the NICM website - www.nicm.edu.au.

Scientific research on CM is relatively new, so this type of information may not be available for many CM disciplines, including some long-established forms of CM. In some instances, the standard of scientific evidence for the effectiveness of CM is of poor quality and it is not possible to draw firm conclusions. This is important to factor in when considering all the options for managing health. Fortunately, there is a worldwide effort underway to help improve the evidence base and understanding of CM.

To help in your decision making, consider the following questions:

- What benefits do I hope to achieve with CM?
- Which CM approach is suitable and feasible for me, if any?
- Are there better alternatives?
- What is the evidence that supports the quality, safety and effectiveness of this CM?

- What are the risks associated with using this CM therapy or product?
- Should I get more information from a CM practitioner who has expertise in this area of CM?

If you are unsure about the answers to these questions or uncomfortable with your understanding of some of the issues, you should talk to a healthcare professional, such as your doctor, pharmacist, as well as your complementary healthcare provider (see below and also *Choosing a Complementary Medicine Practitioner Fact Sheet*).

Talk to your healthcare professionals about options

It is always a good idea to discuss any health options you are considering, including CM options, with your trusted health professionals.

- Before deciding on a CM therapy or product, tell them about the therapy or products you are considering and ask any questions you may have. They may know about the therapy and be able to advise you on its general safety, use, and effectiveness. Ideally, they should be able to provide guidance about whether it is safe and likely to provide benefits in your particular situation. Be very cautious about using a CM therapy as a replacement for any proven treatment or as a reason to postpone seeing your doctor about a medical problem.
- If you are already receiving CM treatment, or using a CM product, tell your healthcare practitioner about it. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. Some CM approaches can have a positive impact on your overall wellbeing however others can cause side effects or interact with conventional medicines. This will help them give you better advice and ensure that your healthcare is coordinated and safe.

Understanding and reducing the risks of using complementary medicine

As with any medical treatment, there can be risks associated with using CM therapies and products. The severity of the risk depends on the specific therapy being used, why it is being used and individual factors such as your general state of health and other treatments being used.

- Serious forms of disease, conditions and disorders should not be diagnosed or treated without first consulting a suitably qualified healthcare professional.
- Some forms of CM can interact adversely with conventional therapies and products (such as prescription and over-the-counter medicines) as well as with other CM products.

How a person responds to a CM therapy depends on many things, including the person's state of health, age and sex and how the therapy is to be used. You should be aware that individuals can respond differently to the same treatment irrespective of whether it is a CM or conventional treatment.

- Consult your healthcare practitioner before arranging therapy for a child or if you are pregnant, intending to become pregnant or breastfeeding, if you are a senior, have been diagnosed with a serious disease or significant previously diagnosed medical condition, or are scheduled for an operation.

If the CM therapy is delivered under the supervision of a practitioner, including practices where the practitioner individually prepares a medicine for you, then you should choose your practitioner carefully (*Choosing a Complementary Medicine Practitioner Fact Sheet*).

Only use CM products that are approved for use in Australia as there is some assurance they have been produced to adequate quality control standards. This is important because some countries don't have robust quality control mechanisms in place and the quality of their CM medicines can vary considerably. Individuals that import medicines into Australia, including CM medicines, for personal use (either bringing the medicine in their luggage or arranging for the product to be sent from overseas) may be at risk because the products have unknown quality, safety and efficacy. Furthermore, if an individual suffers adverse consequences from taking such a product, information about the product and redress may be difficult to obtain.

- Medicines approved for use in Australia are subject to a risk-based assessment by the Australian medicines regulator, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (www.tga.gov.au). This assessment underwrites their quality and safety, including the licensing and audit of manufacturers.
- Medicines meeting Australian standards can be identified from the product label by the designation 'AUST L' or 'AUST R' followed by a unique identifying number. Medicines with an AUST L designation are considered to contain low risk ingredients. They may carry indications for health maintenance and health enhancement or certain non-serious, self-limiting diseases, conditions and disorders. Medicines with an AUST R designation have been assessed by the TGA for quality, safety and efficacy and may be therapeutically indicated for the management of more serious diseases, conditions and disorders.

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