

An Introduction to Naturopathy

Naturopathy, also called naturopathic medicine, is a whole medical system—one of the systems of healing and beliefs that have evolved over time in different cultures and parts of the world. Naturopathy is rooted in health care approaches that were popular in Europe, especially in Germany, in the 19th century, but it also includes therapies (both ancient and modern) from other traditions. In naturopathy, the emphasis is on supporting health rather than combating disease.

Key Points

- People seek naturopathic care for various health-related purposes, including primary care, support of wellness, and treatment of diseases and conditions (often chronic ones).
- Naturopathy focuses upon treatments considered “natural,” but it is not without risk.
- Education and training in naturopathy vary widely. Ask about a practitioner’s education and training, as well as any licensing or certification.
- Rigorous research on naturopathic medicine as a whole medical system is taking place but is at an early stage.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

A Brief Description of Naturopathy

Naturopathy is a whole medical system that has its roots in Germany. It was developed further in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, where today it is part of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).^{*} The word naturopathy comes from Greek and Latin and literally translates as “nature disease.”

A central belief in naturopathy is that nature has a healing power (a principle called *vis medicatrix naturae*). Another belief is that living organisms (including

the human body) have the power to maintain (or return to) a state of balance and health, and to heal themselves. Practitioners of naturopathy prefer to use treatment approaches that they consider to be the most natural and least invasive, instead of using drugs and more invasive procedures.

Naturopathy was named and popularized in the United States by Benedict Lust, who was born in Germany in the late 1800s. When Lust became seriously ill with what he believed was tuberculosis, he was treated by a priest and healer in Germany named Sebastian Kneipp. Kneipp's treatment was based on various healing approaches and philosophies that were popular in Europe, including:

- Hydrotherapy (water treatments).
- The “nature cure” movement, which focused on restoring health through a return to nature. This movement advocated therapies such as gentle exercise, herbal medications, wholesome dietary approaches, and exposure to sun and air.

Lust found his health much improved from Kneipp's treatment, and when he immigrated to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, he was dedicated to popularizing it. He gave it the name *naturopathy*, led the way in developing it as a medical system in the United States, and founded the first naturopathic college and professional association. In naturopathy's early years, other therapies were added to its practice—for example, homeopathy and manipulation (a hands-on therapy).

Naturopathy's popularity reached its peak in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. However, its use began to decline when drugs (such as antibiotics) and other developments in conventional medicine moved to the forefront of health care. Naturopathy began to reemerge in the 1970s, with increased consumer interest in “holistic” health approaches and the founding of new naturopathic medical colleges. Today, naturopathy is practiced in a number of countries, including the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Survey findings on the number of Americans who use naturopathy are shown below.

Americans' Use of Naturopathy

In a national survey on Americans' use of CAM, published in 2004, just under 1 percent of the 31,000 survey respondents had used naturopathy. These respondents reported that they used it because they:

- Believed that naturopathy combined with conventional medicine would help (62 percent)
- Believed that conventional medical treatments would not help (53 percent)
- Thought naturopathy would be interesting to try (44 percent)
- Thought that conventional medicine was too expensive (28 percent)
- Were referred to naturopathy by a conventional medical professional (17 percent).

Source: Barnes PM, Powell-Griner E, McFann K, Nahin RL. Complementary and alternative medicine use among adults: United States, 2002. *CDC Advance Data Report* #343. 2004.

Key Principles

The practice of naturopathy is based on six key principles:

1. **Promote the healing power of nature.**
2. **First do no harm.** Naturopathic practitioners choose therapies with the intent to keep harmful side effects to a minimum and not suppress symptoms.
3. **Treat the whole person.** Practitioners believe a person's health is affected by many factors, such as physical, mental, emotional, genetic, environmental, and social ones. Practitioners consider all these factors when choosing therapies and tailor treatment to each patient.
4. **Treat the cause.** Practitioners seek to identify and treat the causes of a disease or condition, rather than its symptoms. They believe that symptoms are signs that the body is trying to fight disease, adapt to it, or recover from it.
5. **Prevention is the best cure.** Practitioners teach ways of living that they consider most healthy and most likely to prevent illness.
6. **The physician is a teacher.** Practitioners consider it important to educate their patients in taking responsibility for their own health.

Who Provides Naturopathy

In the United States, professionals who practice naturopathy generally fall into one of several groups. (The terms used by some practitioners vary and may depend on the legal situation in the states where they practice.)

Naturopathic Physicians

Naturopathic physicians are educated and trained in a 4-year, graduate-level program at one of the four U.S. naturopathic medical schools accredited by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education. Admission requirements include a bachelor's degree and standard premedical courses. The study program includes basic sciences, naturopathic therapies and techniques, diagnostic techniques and tests, specialty courses, clinical sciences, and clinical training. Graduates receive the degree of N.D. (Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine). Postdoctoral training is not required, but graduates may pursue it.

Depending on where they wish to practice, naturopathic physicians may also need to be licensed. A number of states, the District of Columbia, and two U.S. territories have such licensing requirements (see the box below), most often consisting of graduation from a 4-year naturopathic medical college and passing the national standardized board examination (known as the NPLEX). The scope of practice varies by state and jurisdiction. For example, some states allow naturopathic physicians with special training to prescribe drugs, perform minor surgery, practice acupuncture, and/or assist in childbirth.

Regulation of Naturopathy

The following U.S. states and jurisdictions have laws regulating the practice of naturopathy:

- Alaska
- Arizona
- California
- Connecticut
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Kansas
- Maine
- Montana
- New Hampshire
- Oregon
- Utah
- Vermont
- Washington
- District of Columbia
- Puerto Rico
- U.S. Virgin Islands

Source: Web site of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians accessed on March 26, 2007.

Traditional Naturopaths

The second major group of practitioners are traditional naturopaths, or simply naturopaths. They emphasize education in naturopathic approaches to a healthy lifestyle, strengthening and cleansing the body, and noninvasive treatments. Prescription drugs, x-rays, and surgery are several of the practices that traditional naturopaths do not use. Education and training for these practitioners typically consists of correspondence courses, an apprenticeship, and/or self-teaching. Admission requirements for schools can range from none, to a high school diploma, to specific degrees and coursework. Programs vary in length and content. They are not accredited by agencies recognized for accreditation purposes by the U.S. Department of Education. Traditional naturopaths are not subject to licensing.

Conventional Providers With Naturopathic Training

This group consists of licensed conventional medical providers (such as doctors of medicine, doctors of osteopathy, dentists, and nurses) who pursue additional training in naturopathic treatments, and possibly other holistic therapies. Education and training programs for this purpose also vary.

What Practitioners Do in Treating Patients

A first visit to a naturopathic practitioner is usually an extended appointment. The practitioner will interview the patient at length about his health history, reasons for the visit, and lifestyle (such as diet, stress, alcohol and tobacco use, sleep, and exercise). The practitioner may perform examinations and, if in her scope of practice, order diagnostic and screening tests. Toward the end of the appointment, a management plan is set up to address the patient's general health and problems with illness. Referrals to other health care providers may be made, if appropriate.

Practitioners may deliver some naturopathic treatments in their offices, such as hydrotherapy or manipulation. Examples of additional treatments are

- Dietary changes (for example, eating more whole and unprocessed foods)
- Vitamins, minerals, and other dietary supplements
- Herbal medicine
- Counseling and education on lifestyle changes

- Homeopathy
- Hydrotherapy (for example, applying hot water, then cold water)
- Manual and body-based therapies such as manipulation and mobilization
- Exercise therapy
- Mind-body therapies such as yoga and meditation.

Some practitioners use other treatments as well.

Side Effects and Risks

Naturopathy appears to be a generally safe health care approach, especially if used as complementary (rather than alternative) medicine, but several qualifying points are important:

- Naturopathy is not a complete substitute for conventional medical care.
- Some therapies used in naturopathy have the potential to be harmful if not used properly or under the direction of a trained practitioner. For example, herbs can cause side effects on their own and interact with prescription or over-the-counter medicines. Restrictive or other unconventional diets can be unsafe for some people.
- Some practitioners of naturopathy do not recommend using all or some of the childhood vaccinations that are standard practice in conventional medicine.
- The education and training of practitioners of naturopathy vary widely.

Naturopathy as a whole medical system is challenging to study. Rigorous research on this whole medical system is taking place but is at an early stage. Resources for seeking findings from studies (including studies on many individual therapies used in naturopathy) are at the end of this Backgrounder.

Some Other Points To Consider

- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.
- Naturopathic physicians are trained to know that herbs and some dietary supplements can potentially interact with drugs, and to avoid those combinations. To do so, they need to be informed of all drugs (whether prescription or over-the-counter) and supplements that you are taking.
- Talk to the practitioner about:
 - His education and training, and any licensing or certification
 - Any special medical conditions you have and whether the practitioner has had any specialized training or experience in them
 - Costs, and whether the services are covered by your medical insurance plan.

Some Points of Controversy

As in other fields of CAM, there are some controversies in naturopathy. For example:

- Practitioners of naturopathy do not always agree on educational requirements or how naturopathy should be practiced and regulated.
- A number of beliefs and practices in naturopathy do not follow the scientific approach of conventional medicine.
- Practitioners are divided on whether this system of medicine should be studied using conventional medical research approaches.

NCCAM-Funded Research in Naturopathy

Some recent NCCAM-supported projects have been studying:

- CAM approaches, including naturopathic treatments, for women with temporomandibular disorder, a condition in which the joints connecting the skull to the lower jaw become inflamed
- A naturopathic dietary approach as a complementary treatment for type 2 diabetes
- The mushroom *Trametes versicolor*, for its effects as a complementary immune therapy in women with breast cancer
- The costs and effects of naturopathic care, compared with conventional care, for low-back pain
- Herbal and dietary approaches for menopausal symptoms.

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For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

The 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

PubMed®

A service of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), PubMed contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals. CAM on PubMed, developed jointly by NCCAM and NLM, is a subset of the PubMed system and focuses on the topic of CAM.

Web site: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez

CAM on PubMed: nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/

ClinicalTrials.gov

ClinicalTrials.gov is a database of information on federally and privately supported clinical trials (research studies in people) for a wide range of diseases and conditions. It is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Web site: www.clinicaltrials.gov

CRISP (Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects)

CRISP is a database of information on federally funded scientific and medical research projects being conducted at research institutions.

Web site: www.crisp.cit.nih.gov

Acknowledgments

NCCAM thanks the following people for their technical expertise and review of this publication: Leanna Standish, N.D., Ph.D., Bastyr University; Carlo Calabrese, N.D., M.P.H., Helfgott Research Institute, National College of Natural Medicine; Wendy Weber, N.D., Bastyr University; Suzanna Zick, N.D., M.P.H., University of Michigan Health System; and Shan Wong, Ph.D., and Richard Nahin, Ph.D., M.P.H., NCCAM.

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