

cam basics

Are You Considering CAM?

For thousands of Americans, health care includes some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Like any decision concerning your health, decisions about whether to use CAM are important. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) has developed this fact sheet to assist you in your decision making about CAM. It includes frequently asked questions, issues to consider, and sources for further information.

Key Points

- Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. Find out and consider what scientific studies have been done on the safety and effectiveness of the CAM therapy that interests you. Discuss the information with your health care provider before making a decision.
- If you decide to use a CAM therapy provided by a practitioner, such as acupuncture or chiropractic, choose the practitioner with care.
- If you decide to use a dietary supplement, such as an herbal product, find out about any potential side effects or interactions with medications or other dietary supplements you may be taking.
- Tell all 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.

What is CAM?

CAM is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine. Conventional medicine is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) or D.O. (doctor of osteopathy) degrees and by their allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists, and registered nurses. Integrative medicine combines conventional and CAM treatments for which there is evidence of safety and effectiveness.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

National Center for Complementary
and Alternative Medicine



How can I get reliable information about a CAM therapy?

It is important to learn what scientific studies have discovered about the CAM therapy you are considering. Making a decision based on the facts is a better idea than using a therapy simply because of something you have seen in an advertisement or on a Web site or because someone has told you that it worked for them. (For tips on how to evaluate Web site information, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Evaluating Web-Based Health Resources*.)

Understanding a therapy's potential benefits, risks, and scientific evidence is critical to your health and safety. Scientific research on many CAM therapies is relatively new, so this kind of information may not be available for every therapy. However, many studies are under way, including those that NCCAM supports, and knowledge and understanding of CAM are increasing all the time. Here are some ways to find reliable information:

- **Talk with your doctor or other health care providers.** Tell them about the therapy you are considering and ask any questions you may have about safety, effectiveness, or interactions with medications (prescription or nonprescription) or other dietary supplements. They may know about the therapy and be able to advise you on its safety and use.
- **Visit the NCCAM Web site (nccam.nih.gov).** The "Health Information" page has information on specific CAM therapies, and links to other online sources of information. It also has contact information for the **NCCAM Clearinghouse**, where information specialists are available to assist you in searching the peer-reviewed literature and to suggest useful NCCAM publications.
- **Visit your local library or a medical library.** Ask the reference librarian to help you find books and scientific journals with information on the therapy that interests you.

Are CAM therapies safe? How can I minimize risks in using CAM therapies?

As with any medical treatment, there can be risks with CAM therapies. These risks depend on the specific therapy. Each CAM therapy needs to be considered on its own. However, if you are considering a CAM therapy, the following general suggestions can help you think about safety and minimize risks.

- Take charge of your health by being an informed consumer. Find out what the scientific evidence is about any therapy's safety and whether it works.
- Be aware that individuals respond differently to treatments, whether conventional or CAM. How a person might respond to a CAM therapy depends on many things, including the person's state of health, how the therapy is used, or the person's belief in the therapy.
- Keep in mind that "natural" does not necessarily mean "safe." (Think of mushrooms that grow in the wild: some are safe to eat, while others are not.)
- Learn about factors that affect safety. For a CAM therapy that is administered by a practitioner, these factors include the training, skill, and experience of the practitioner. For a CAM product such as a dietary supplement, the specific ingredients and the quality of the manufacturing process are important factors.

- If you decide to use a CAM therapy that would be given by a practitioner, choose the practitioner carefully.
- If you decide to use a dietary supplement, such as an herbal product, be aware that some products may interact with medications (prescription or over-the-counter) or other dietary supplements, and some may have side effects on their own. (To learn more, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely*.)
- Tell all 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. For tips about talking with your health care providers about CAM, see NCCAM’s Time To Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

How can I determine whether statements made about the effectiveness of a CAM therapy are true?

Statements that manufacturers and providers of CAM therapies may make about effectiveness and benefits can sound reasonable and promising. However, the statements may not be backed up by scientific evidence. Before you begin using a CAM therapy, it is a good idea to ask the following questions:

- Is there scientific evidence (not just personal stories) to back up the statements?
- Does the Federal Government have anything to report about the therapy?
 - Visit the NCCAM Web site or contact the NCCAM Clearinghouse to see if NCCAM has information about the therapy.
 - Visit the FDA online at www.fda.gov to see if there is any information available about the product or practice. Information specifically about dietary supplements can be found on FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition Web site, at www.cfsan.fda.gov. Or visit the FDA’s Web page on recalls and safety alerts at www.fda.gov/opacom/7alerts.html.
 - Check with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) at www.ftc.gov to see if there are any enforcement actions for deceptive advertising regarding the therapy. Also, visit the site’s Diet, Health, and Fitness Consumer Information section at www.ftc.gov/bcp/menus/consumer/health.shtm.
- How does the provider or manufacturer describe the therapy?
 - Question terms like “scientific breakthrough,” “miracle cure,” “secret ingredient,” or “ancient remedy.”
 - If you encounter claims of a “quick fix” that departs from previous research, keep in mind that science usually advances over time by small steps, slowly building toward an evidence base.
 - Remember: if it sounds too good to be true—for example, claims that a therapy can cure a disease or works for a wide variety of ailments—it usually is.

Are CAM therapies tested to see if they work?

While some scientific evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of some CAM therapies, for most there are key questions that are yet to be answered through well-designed scientific studies—questions such as how the therapies work, and whether they work for the diseases or medical conditions for which they are used. As the Federal Government’s lead agency for scientific research on CAM, NCCAM supports studies to answer these questions and determine who might benefit most from the use of specific therapies.

I am interested in a CAM therapy that involves treatment from a practitioner. How do I go about selecting a practitioner?

Your health care provider or local hospital may be able to recommend a practitioner. The professional organization for the type of practitioner you are seeking may have helpful information, such as licensing and training requirements. Many states have regulatory agencies or licensing boards for certain types of practitioners; they may be able to help you locate practitioners in your area. For more suggestions, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Selecting a CAM Practitioner*.

Can I receive treatment or a referral to a practitioner from NCCAM?

NCCAM does not provide CAM treatments or referrals to practitioners. NCCAM’s mission is to explore CAM practices using rigorous scientific methods and build an evidence base for the safety and effectiveness of these practices.

Can I participate in a CAM clinical trial?

NCCAM supports clinical trials (research studies in people) on CAM therapies. Clinical trials on CAM are taking place in many locations worldwide, and study participants are needed. To learn more, see the NCCAM fact sheet *Clinical Trials and CAM*. To find trials that are recruiting participants, go to the Web site nccam.nih.gov/research/clinicaltrials. You can search this site by type of therapy or by disease or condition. If you do not have access to the Internet, contact the NCCAM Clearinghouse for information.

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

Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS), NIH

ODS seeks to strengthen knowledge and understanding of dietary supplements by evaluating scientific information, supporting research, sharing research results, and educating the public. Its resources include publications and the International Bibliographic Information on Dietary Supplements database.

Web site: www.ods.od.nih.gov

E-mail: ods@nih.gov

NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus

To provide resources that help answer health questions, MedlinePlus brings together authoritative information from the National Institutes of Health as well as other Government agencies and health-related organizations.

Web site: www.medlineplus.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/sites/entrez

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

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

The FDA oversees the safety of many products, such as foods, medicines, dietary supplements, medical devices, and cosmetics.

Web site: www.fda.gov

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-463-6332

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

The FTC is the Federal agency charged with protecting the public against unfair and deceptive business practices. A key area of its work is the regulation of advertising (except for prescription and medical devices).

Web site: www.ftc.gov

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-877-382-4357

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