

Selecting a CAM Practitioner

Selecting a health care practitioner is an important decision and can be essential to ensuring that you are receiving the best possible care. This fact sheet provides information on selecting a practitioner whose services are part of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), such as acupuncture, chiropractic, and naturopathy. It also suggests sources for additional information.

Key Points

- Talk to your primary health care providers if you are considering a CAM therapy. They may be able to answer questions and/or refer you to a practitioner. Also, be aware that there are other resources for locating a CAM practitioner, such as professional organizations for specific practitioner groups.
- Gather basic information on the CAM practitioners you are considering, such as education, experience, and cost, and interview them in person or by telephone. Make your selection based on their answers to your questions, and your level of comfort during the interview.
- Evaluate your practitioner after the initial treatment visit—including what you have been told to expect in terms of therapy outcomes, time, and costs—and decide if the practitioner is right for you.
- Tell all of 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/.

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NCCAM

About 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.

Complementary medicine is used together with conventional medicine, and *alternative medicine* is used in place of conventional medicine. *Integrative medicine* combines conventional and CAM treatments for which there is evidence of safety and effectiveness. For more about these terms, see the NCCAM fact sheet *What Is CAM?*

Time To Talk

It is always a good idea to discuss any health options you are considering, including CAM options, with your trusted health professionals. Before selecting a CAM therapy or practitioner, talk with all your health care providers. Tell them about the therapy you are considering and ask any questions you may have. They may know about the therapy and be able to advise you on its safety, use, and effectiveness, or possible interactions with medications.

Finding CAM Practitioners

Several resources are available to help you find CAM practitioners:

- Your doctor or other health care provider may be able to give a referral.
- A nearby hospital or a medical school may have a list of local CAM practitioners or may be able to make a specific recommendation. Some regional medical centers may have CAM centers or CAM practitioners on staff.
- Professional organizations for CAM therapists often provide referrals to practitioners as well as information on therapies, standards of practice and training, and state licensing requirements. These organizations can be located by searching the Internet or directories in libraries (ask the librarian). One source is the National Library of Medicine's Directory of Health Organizations Online (dirline.nlm.nih.gov). Some professions may be represented by more than one organization.
- State regulatory agencies or licensing boards for health care professionals may provide information regarding practitioners in your area. Your state, county, or city health department may also refer you to such agencies or boards.

Even if a friend recommends a CAM practitioner, or if you have found a practitioner through your local Yellow Pages, looking into the resources suggested above can give you confidence that you have considered all the best possibilities.

Choosing a Practitioner

As when choosing any health care provider, contact the practitioners you are considering to gather some basic information. Although you can do this over the phone, consider asking for a brief, in-person consultation (which may or may not involve a charge). Practitioners may also have a Web site or brochure. Before you make your contacts, think about what is important to you—what you need to know to make your decision. You might ask about:

- Education, training, licenses, and certifications. If you have information from a professional organization, compare the practitioner’s qualifications with the training and licensing standards for that profession.
- Areas of specialization, experience treating patients with problems similar to your own, and his or her philosophy of care.
- Any scientific research studies that support the treatment’s use for your condition.
- The number of patients the practitioner sees in a typical day and average time spent with each patient.
- Treatment costs, including charges per session, charges for cancelled appointments, payment options, and participation in your insurance plan (see box below).
- Office hours, how far in advance you need to schedule an appointment, and typical waiting time in the office.
- Office locations—for example, accessibility to public transportation, parking, and elevators.
- What to expect during the first visit or assessment.

After making your contacts, think about how comfortable you felt during your initial conversations with the practitioners and their staff, and review the information they provided. How do they measure up in terms of what is most important to you? Now, you are ready to decide which practitioner will most likely meet your needs.

Insurance Coverage

If you have health insurance, it may not cover your CAM therapy. Even if it covers the therapy, you may have to pay for part of the cost. Before agreeing to any CAM treatment, ask your insurer what percentage of the cost, if any, will be covered. Also find out whether the practitioner participates in your insurance plan. The NCCAM fact sheet *Paying for CAM Treatment* has additional information.

The First Visit

The first visit is important. Come prepared to answer questions about your health—past and present. Bring a written list of surgeries, injuries, and major illnesses, as well as the prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and vitamins and other supplements you take. Also come prepared to ask questions, for example:

- Are there any scientific research studies that show that this therapy may be helpful?
- What benefits can I expect from the therapy?
- What are the risks associated with the therapy?
- Do the known benefits outweigh the risks for my disease or condition?
- What side effects can be expected?
- Will the therapy interfere with any of my daily activities?
- How long will I need to undergo treatment, or how many office visits will I need? How often will my progress or treatment plan be assessed?
- What are the costs for the recommended treatments? Will I need to buy any equipment or supplies?
- Could the therapy interfere with conventional treatments?
- Are there any conditions for which this treatment should not be used?

Make a list of questions before your visit. Bring a notepad to record the answers (some people bring a recording device). Consider asking a family member or friend to accompany you, so you can compare notes after your visit.

Evaluating the Practitioner

After your first visit, ask yourself:

- Was the practitioner easy to talk to? Did I feel comfortable?
- Was the practitioner willing to answer all my questions? Was I satisfied with the answers?
- Was the practitioner open to considering how CAM therapy and conventional medicine might work together for my benefit?
- Did the practitioner get to know me and ask me about my health condition?
- Did the practitioner seem knowledgeable about my specific health condition?
- Does the recommended treatment seem reasonable to me?
- Was the practitioner clear about the time and costs associated with treatment?

Building a relationship with a new practitioner takes time. Nevertheless, if at any time you are not satisfied or comfortable, you should discuss your concerns with the practitioner and feel free to stop treatment or look for a different practitioner. Before deciding to stop treatment, however, ask if doing so is safe. If you do stop treatment, tell your other health care providers so they can continue to make fully informed decisions about your care.

NCCAM's Role

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is the Federal Government's lead agency for scientific research on CAM. NCCAM's mission is to explore CAM healing practices in the context of rigorous science, train CAM researchers, and disseminate authoritative information to the public and professionals.

Although NCCAM does not provide referrals to CAM practitioners, its Web site (nccam.nih.gov) offers useful resources for people considering a CAM therapy. The "Health Information" page of the NCCAM Web site (nccam.nih.gov/health/) provides access to a variety of fact sheets and other resources to help people be informed consumers of CAM services and products. The "Clinical Trials" page (nccam.nih.gov/research/clinicaltrials/) has information on NCCAM-supported clinical trials (studies in people) on CAM therapies, including studies that are recruiting participants.

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

National Library of Medicine (NLM)

NLM is the world's largest medical library. Services include PubMed®, which contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals. NLM also maintains DIRLINE, a database that contains locations and descriptive information about a variety of health organizations, including CAM associations and organizations.

Web site: www.nlm.nih.gov

PubMed: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez

DIRLINE: dirline.nlm.nih.gov

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