



# Evaluating Complementary and Alternative Therapies

According to the American Cancer Society, *complementary therapies* are “supportive methods used to complement conventional evidence-based treatment.” Examples include meditation to reduce stress, acupuncture for pain, and ginger for nausea. Complementary therapies are not given to cure disease; instead, they are used to help control symptoms and improve your feeling of well-being. *Alternative* refers to treatments that are promoted as cancer cures. They are unproven, which means they have not been scientifically tested, or they were tested and found to be not effective. Although many very beneficial complementary therapies are used safely and effectively with conventional medicine, just as many therapies are not beneficial—some are even harmful. It is important to approach the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) armed with good, unbiased information.

Below are some important questions to ask about the CAM practices you are considering. Answer all the following questions honestly and completely before embarking on a new treatment method:

- ◆ Is the practitioner qualified and educated in the practice he or she is providing or recommending? Is there licensure for this practice and if so, does the practitioner have the necessary documentation?
- ◆ Has the practice been scientifically proven to be safe and effective for someone like you? Also, is it safe and effective to participate in this therapy during your conventional medicine treatments? Are there any known interactions between your current medicines and this therapy?
- ◆ Is there a CAM practice that is less invasive but may have the same therapeutic outcome? For example, if you need to relax, massage therapy may be a better choice than taking a dietary supplement.
- ◆ What do you hope to achieve with this therapy? Are your expectations for this treatment realistic?

## Additional Tips for Evaluating CAM Therapies

- ◆ Don't just accept promises that you will be cured of disease or relieved of symptoms. Some kinds of CAM may help you, but you need to do your research before you try any CAM therapy.
- ◆ Be careful about getting involved with a treatment program that is done “in secret,” without working with your conventional health care team. Communication is essential between you and all your health care providers, conventional and CAM.
- ◆ Gather scientific information on any CAM practice you are considering. This information will help you make a more informed decision and will help keep your conventional health care team “in the loop.”
- ◆ Be aware that the quality and strength of many dietary supplements varies from brand to brand and from bottle to bottle. Unfortunately, there is still no guarantee that most dietary supplements actually contain what the bottle says they do. Even if you buy two bottles of the same product from the same company, the contents may not be the same in both. Do your research and find out which companies are careful about producing reliable, good-quality supplements.
- ◆ Keep in mind that the government does not regulate all CAM practices. Also, national laws do not require companies to prove whether dietary supplements are safe and effective before they sell them. You need to find unbiased people and information to help you make the best decisions for your health.

## Resources for CAM Practices

### **Food and Drug Administration**

5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857  
888/332-4543  
<http://www.fda.gov>  
Report adverse reactions to MedWatch:  
800/332-1088.

### **Office of Dietary Supplements**

National Institutes of Health  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
<http://ods.od.nih.gov>

### **NAPALERT—Natural Products Alert Database**

Program for Collaborative Research/ Pharmaceutical  
Sciences, College of Pharmacy, University of Illinois  
Chicago, IL 60612  
312/996-2246

### **National Council Against Health Fraud**

PO Box 1276  
Loma Linda, CA 92354  
909/824-4690  
<http://www.ncahf.org>

### **National Cancer Institute**

#### **PDQ Database CAM Summaries**

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdq/cam>

### **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine**

National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Mail Stop 2182, Bldg 31, Rm 5B-38  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
800/531-1794  
<http://www.nccam.nih.gov>