

Integrative and Complementary Therapies

Integrative therapies, also called complementary therapies, treat the whole person, not just the disease. They focus on helping the body heal itself. They have been used to reduce stress, prevent or reduce side effects and symptoms from disease or treatment.

Types of integrative and complementary therapies

These therapies are used *along* with standard treatments during and after cancer care. Many people already use such therapies and do not know it.

Biological

Dietary change and dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals and herbs are being studied as ways to both lower risk and treat breast cancer. Some studies suggest soy and flaxseed may lower the risk of breast cancer. However, more studies are needed as it remains unclear how these supplements affect breast cancer risk. At this time, we know little about combining dietary supplements with proven therapies for breast cancer. It is important to discuss taking supplements during treatment with your doctor.

Mind-body

Did you know that prayer, meditation, laughter and support groups are complementary therapies? So are imagery (imagining your body fighting the cancer and healing itself), aromatherapy (using fragrances to help you feel calm, relaxed or energized) and art therapy (expressing your feelings through art).

The healing touch

These therapies use human touch to promote healing and help to control pain. This includes massage and chiropractic medicine, acupuncture (using needles to stimulate certain points on the body), reflexology (using touch to stimulate certain points on your feet) and therapeutic touch (re-balancing the body's energy fields through touch).



Ancient healing

Traditional forms of healing often represent not only a different way of thinking about disease, but also of thinking about life. These therapies include ayurveda (an Indian system that brings the body into harmony with its environment) and traditional Chinese medicine, which stresses the importance of balancing energy forces.

Is complementary therapy right for you?

STEP 1: Learn your options

If certain therapies interest you, find out more about them. Talk to your doctor, family and friends. Do research at the library or on a credible website. Get as much information as you can. Spend time to find which therapies may help you the most.

STEP 2: Get referrals

Word of mouth is often the best form of advertising. Ask others if they have tried a certain therapy. Was it helpful? What results did they get and how long did it take? Do not be afraid to ask questions. Be aware that every person responds differently to therapy. What works for another person may not work for you.

STEP 3: Screen the provider

Call the provider's office and say, "I'm thinking about making an appointment but would like to ask some questions first." You should receive honest, straight-forward answers. If not, look elsewhere.

STEP 4: Interview the provider

Bring a list of questions to ask. If a provider answers your questions but something still does not feel right,

look for another provider. Trust your instincts. If you are not sure, bring a friend along who can be more objective.

STEP 5: Form a partnership with your doctor and your provider

A good partnership is based on mutual respect and caring, honest communication and a shared commitment to healing. Always talk to your doctor before starting an integrative therapy. Some therapies may interfere with standard treatment or be harmful when used with conventional treatment.

Excerpt from: *Five Steps to Selecting the Best Alternative Medicine: A guide to Complementary and Integrative Health Care* by Mary and Michael Morton. 1977 (New World Library: Novato, CA).

Resources

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
1-888-463-6332
www.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) at the National Institutes of Health
1-888-644-6226
<http://nccam.nih.gov>

NIH Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS)
1-301-435-2920
www.ods.od.nih.gov

Internet

HealthWorld Online
www.healthy.net

M.D. Anderson
www.mdanderson.org/departments/cimer

Memorial Sloan-Kettering
www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm

Natural Standard
www.naturalstandard.com

Evaluating an integrative therapy

What benefits can be expected?

What risks are associated with the therapy?

What side effects can be expected?

Will the therapy interfere with standard treatment?

What do patients who have tried the therapy say about it?

What is the provider's reputation?

What kind of training has the provider had?

Does scientific and medical research support the therapy?

Does your doctor recommend the therapy? Why or why not?

Does your insurance cover it? How will you pay for it?

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Diet & Nutrition During Treatment
- Making Treatment Decisions
- Treatment Choices — An Overview