



Fact Sheet

## Complementary & Alternative Medicine (CAM) or Integrative Medicine & Pain

### About

Pain is one of the most common conditions for which adults use complementary and alternative therapies.<sup>1</sup> When advocating for pain management, it is important to consider integrative care and have an understanding of what this is and what it means in the spectrum of pain treatment.

“Complementary alternative medicine refers to therapies other than the use of pharmaceutical products to relieve or treat an illness.”

12 months. The most common CAM therapies used were natural products, deep breathing, meditation, chiropractic and osteopathic, massage and yoga.<sup>2</sup>

Modern or traditional medicine includes treatments, medications and therapies that have been around for less than 100 years. The terms complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) refer to therapies other than the use of pharmaceutical products to relieve or treat an illness. According to the 2007 National Health Statistics Report, almost 4 out of 10 adults had used CAM therapy in the past

The blend of CAM and traditional Western medicine has come to be defined as integrative medicine or integrative care. It combines the concepts of mind, body, spirit and community and supports the theory of healing, and not always attempting to cure an illness. Integrative medicine involves not only the relationships between the patient and the health care provider(s), but also the relationship the patient has with his entire body and mind – a holistic approach. Integrative care may include one or a number of CAM therapies, as well as traditional approaches such as prescription or over-the-counter medication.

### Including CAM in Your Pain Management Plan: Some Things to Consider

Surprisingly, nearly half of those using complementary and alternative therapies do not tell their primary care doctors about it—either out of embarrassment or fear of being reprimanded. But it's important to tell the doctor the whole truth. So if you are thinking about incorporating CAM approaches into your pain management plan, here are some things you should do:

- Consult with your healthcare provider. Discuss all conventional and CAM treatments you are using. Ask about CAM therapies, and how they can be included in your pain management plan.
- Assess the safety and effectiveness of the therapy. A safe therapy does no harm when used under defined conditions and as intended. An effective therapy is one that has measurable benefits. Ask your healthcare professional about the safety and effectiveness of the therapy you are interested in.
- Check out the practitioner's expertise, background, qualifications, and competence. Contact your state or local regulatory agency with authority over the type of treatment you are seeking. Check to see if the practitioner is licensed to deliver services he or she claims to provide. Talk to your doctor and other patients about the practitioner.
- Talk to the practitioner. Ask about his or her education, additional training, licenses, and certifications—both conventional and CAM. Will he or she provide you with information about the therapy (e.g., how it's administered, what it's supposed to do, and any possible side effects)?
- Consider the quality of service delivery. Learn about how and where the therapy is given, and whether it meets with regulated standards for medical safety and care. Visit the practitioner's setting. Ask about how many patients he or she sees, and how much time is spent with patients.
- Think about the Costs. Learn about which treatments will be reimbursed by your medical insurer. Many CAM treatments are not covered yet. Contact several practitioners and see what they're charging for similar therapies.

SOURCE: American Pain Foundation. Treatment Options: A Guide for People Living with Pain.  
<http://www.painfoundation.org/learn/publications/files/TreatmentOptions2006.pdf>

## Facts

According to a recent review published by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the benefits of complementary and alternative therapies for back and neck pain—such as acupuncture, massage, and spinal manipulation—are modest in size but provide more benefit than usual medical care. While these effects are most evident following the end of treatment, the authors of the report noted that very few studies looked at long-term outcomes. Back and neck pain are important health problems that affect millions of Americans, and back pain is the most common medical condition for which people use CAM.<sup>3</sup>

### Types of CAM Often Used for Pain Include:

#### **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture was developed in China and has been practiced in China and other Asian countries for thousands of years. The term “acupuncture” describes a family of procedures that involve stimulation of anatomical points on the body using a variety of techniques. The most commonly

used and most scientifically studied acupuncture technique involves penetrating the skin with thin, solid, metallic needles that are manipulated by hand or electrical stimulation.<sup>4</sup>

- People use acupuncture for various types of pain. Back pain is the most commonly reported use, followed by joint pain, neck pain, and headache. Acupuncture is being studied for its efficacy in alleviating many kinds of pain. There are promising findings in some conditions, such as chronic low-back pain and osteoarthritis of the knee; but, for most other conditions, additional research is needed. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) sponsors a wide range of acupuncture research.<sup>5</sup>
- Acupuncture appears to be effective for a variety of pain conditions, including: carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, headache/migraine, low-back pain, menstrual cramps, myofascial pain, neck pain, osteoarthritis pain and postoperative dental pain.<sup>5</sup>

### **Ayurveda**

Ayurveda is also called Ayurvedic medicine and originated in India thousands of years ago. Ayurveda incorporates a holistic approach in that it strives to integrate and balance the body, mind, and spirit leading to happiness, health and illness prevention. Practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine work with their patients to eliminate impurities, reduce disease symptoms, increase resistance to disease, and reduce worrying and increase harmony. This type of medicine relies heavily on herbs and other plants in treatment regimens.<sup>6</sup>

### **Biofeedback**

Biofeedback is based on the concept of using your mind to improve your health. Some health professionals believe that individuals have the ability to influence their thoughts to control some of the body's involuntary functions. Special monitoring equipment is used to teach control of certain body functions and their responses. Biofeedback has been used to treat stress-related conditions and other conditions such as asthma, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic low-back pain.<sup>7</sup>

### **Chiropractic**

Chiropractic is a health care approach that focuses on the relationship between the body's structure – mainly the spine – and its functioning. In 1895, Daniel David Palmer, a self-taught healer believed that the body has natural healing power, and spinal misalignments can interfere with the healthy energy flow of the body. He theorized that the key to health is to normalize the function of the nervous system, particularly the spinal cord. Chiropractors typically perform adjustments to the spine or other parts of the body with the goal of correcting alignment problems and supporting the body's natural ability to heal itself. The most common conditions for which people seek chiropractic care are back pain, neck pain, sciatica, joint pain and headache.<sup>8</sup>

### **Homeopathy**

The guiding premise in homeopathic medicine is that every person has an energy called a vital source or self-healing response. The imbalance or disruption of this energy can be

healed through stimulation of the body's own healing responses, according to homeopathic theory. Most homeopathic remedies are derived from natural substances that come from plants, minerals or animals.<sup>9</sup>

Two major meta-analyses of the clinical effects of homeopathy have been done, with both finding results that indicate positive effects of homeopathy over placebo. However, the authors found insufficient evidence from these studies that homeopathy is clearly effective for any single clinical condition and called for further rigorous research. No studies have shown effectiveness specifically for pain: studies of the most popular homeopathic remedy for tissue inflammation, arnica, have failed to show its effectiveness over placebo.<sup>10</sup>

### **Hypnosis**

Hypnosis is a heightened state of concentration and focused attention usually achieved with the help of a specially-trained therapist. The goal of hypnosis is typically to help a person overcome or deal with a specific health condition such as managing chronic pain, easing symptoms of asthma or quitting smoking. The purpose of hypnosis is to help one gain control over behavior, emotion or physical well-being by focusing attention and remaining relaxed and calm.<sup>11</sup>

### **Massage Therapy**

Massage dates back thousands of year in numerous cultures and is used for a variety of health-related purposes including to relieve pain, rehabilitate sports injuries, reduce stress, increase relaxation, address anxiety and depression and aid general wellness. Although there are many types of massage techniques, typically a therapist will press, rub, and otherwise manipulate the muscles and other soft tissues of the body with their hands, fingers and/or forearms to enhance function and promote relaxation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Meditation**

Meditation is a mind-body technique that teaches a person to focus attention and relate to the flow of emotions and thoughts in the mind. Meditation is sometimes used to increase calmness and physical relaxation, improve physiological balance, cope with an illness or to enhance overall well-being.<sup>13</sup>

### **Tai Chi**

The ancient Chinese discipline of Tai Chi is sometimes thought of as a combination of yoga and meditation in the Western world. Tai Chi is derived from martial arts, is rooted in self-control and is performed through a series of slow, soft, graceful movements with smooth and even transitions. The meditative nature of these exercises is thought to be calming and relaxing, providing both physical and psychological benefits.<sup>14</sup>

### **Yoga**

Yoga is an ancient Indian discipline that teaches balance, flexibility and meditation. This ancient method involves stilling the mind, cultivating kindness toward ourselves and finding a quiet place inside ourselves which may provide consolation in times of stress or pain. Through proper breathing, the mind is calmed and the whole body is cleansed and revitalized.<sup>15</sup>

## Physical Therapy

Many health care providers consider physical therapy an integral part of multidisciplinary pain management. It is defined as the treatment of an injury or disease using physical therapeutic movement. Physical therapists may use therapeutic massage, mobilization and physical movement, exercises, patient education, water therapy, ultrasound, and heat and ice to help improve function, increase flexibility and strength, and decrease pain. Typically, physical therapy treatment goals are individualized and include improving muscle tone, muscle length, muscle strength, balance and stability, joint mobility, range of motion and overall function at home and work.<sup>16</sup>

Remember that these are just a few examples of CAM therapies and that more information may be found at the websites listed below. Also remember that it is important to consult with your health care provider before trying any and all conventional and CAM treatments.

## Additional Resources

### American Pain Foundation

201 N. Charles Street, Suite 710  
Baltimore, MD 21201-4111  
Phone: (888) 615-PAIN (7246)  
E-mail: [info@painfoundation.org](mailto:info@painfoundation.org)  
[www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org)

### Beth Israel Medical Center

First Avenue at 16th Street  
New York, NY 10003  
Phone: (877) 620-9999  
Fax: (212) 844-1503  
E-mail: [stoppain@chpnet.org](mailto:stoppain@chpnet.org)  
[www.healingchronicpain.org](http://www.healingchronicpain.org)  
[www.StopPain.org](http://www.StopPain.org)

### National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

#### National Institutes of Health

9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
E-mail: [info@nccam.nih.gov](mailto:info@nccam.nih.gov)  
[www.nccam.nih.gov/](http://www.nccam.nih.gov/)

Resources verified July 2011.

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