About Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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Complementary and alternative medicine, or CAM, is the term used to describe treatments that aren?t part of conventional cancer treatment (such as chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation therapy). Complementary medicine is used in addition to conventional medicine; this may also be referred to as integrative medicine. Alternative medicine, on the other hand, is a treatment that is used in place of conventional therapy.

Complementary medicine

People often use complementary medicine to manage side effects of conventional cancer treatment or improve their physical or emotional well-being. A few examples of complementary therapies include acupuncture, yoga, massage, relaxation techniques, physical fitness activities, art therapy, music therapy, nutrition counseling, and dietary and herbal supplements [2].

However, not all complementary therapies have been well-studied in people with cancer. Before beginning a complementary therapy, discuss it with your doctor or other member of your health care team to find out if it is safe or if it interferes with your treatment. For instance, the herb kava can interfere with anesthesia for surgery and has been found to cause liver damage. Other herbs and supplements may raise your risk of bleeding after surgery or make chemotherapy less effective. On the other hand, yoga can improve the quality of life [3] for people with breast cancer who are undergoing radiation therapy, and ginger can help reduce nausea from chemotherapy [4].

Your oncologist (cancer doctor) may manage the use of the complementary therapy, or you may see a specific practitioner. Some therapies may be offered through your cancer center, either free of charge or for a fee. If your treatment facility does not offer a specific complementary therapy that interests you, you may wish to find providers in your community. Whenever possible, get referrals from your doctor, other health care team members, or the appropriate professional association to find a practitioner of complementary medicine. Ask about licensing and credentials relevant to their specialization. Find out more questions to ask when considering complementary therapies [5].

Alternative medicine

Alternative therapies are those used in place of conventional treatments. An example of an alternative therapy is going on a special diet to treat cancer instead of having surgery, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy.

Most doctors agree that some complementary therapies may help people with cancer. However, this is not the case with alternative therapies. There are serious risks to be considered when patients abandon proven medical therapies for unproven alternative therapies, including the following:

- Most alternative cancer treatments have not undergone rigorous scientific testing to see if they are safe and effective.
- The alternative treatment may make you sicker due to side effects of the treatment and/or interactions with other medications or supplements.
- An alternative treatment may delay you from beginning standard treatment. Many cancer treatments are based on the size and extent of the tumor; if a person delays treatment by taking an alternative therapy, the cancer may keep growing, and the treatment options once available may no longer be available and/or effective many months or years later.

At this time, there is no alternative to conventional cancer treatment. Approaches marketed as alternative therapies are, in fact, fraudulent treatments that do nothing to treat cancer. Learn more about cancer treatment fraud [6].

More Information

Complementary and Alternative Medicine [5]

Managing Side Effects [7]

Additional Resources

National Institutes of Health: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) [8]

Federal Trade Commission:"Cure-ious? Ask." Campaign to Avoid Cancer Scams [9]

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center: About Herbs, Botanicals, and Other Products [10]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25039
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24744
[4] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-news-and-meetings/asco-annual-meetings/research-summaries/study-shows-ginger-can-reduce-nausea-chemotherapy
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25041
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24559
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