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## [Complementary Therapies and Clinical Trials](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 03/2015

### Key Messages:

- Clinical trials help doctors learn about how safe a complementary therapy is and how well it works.
- Talk with your health care team to learn about the research on a specific complementary therapy.
- Talk with your doctor about which clinical trials might be right for you.

Although types of complementary therapies have been used for centuries, the research on these therapies is fairly new. Today, cancer centers and government organizations research complementary therapies by conducting clinical trials. Clinical trials are research studies involving people.

### Evaluating complementary therapies

Clinical trials help researchers understand how well complementary therapies work to reduce symptoms and side effects. During a [clinical trial](#) [3], a specific therapy goes through a rigorous scientific process. This helps doctors find out whether it is helpful, not helpful, or harmful.

Clinical trials have found that certain complementary methods help people living with cancer when used with [standard cancer treatment](#) [4]. In fact, some complementary therapies are very helpful in relieving symptoms and side effects of cancer treatments. For example, research shows that acupuncture relieves [pain](#) [5], a common symptom among people living with cancer.

It also reduces [nausea and vomiting](#) [6] caused by chemotherapy.

Clinical trials have also shown that alternative methods do not help people with cancer. For instance, a study on adding shark cartilage extract to standard treatment did not lengthen the lives of people with lung cancer. At this time, there are no valid alternatives to standard cancer therapies.

The safety of complementary therapies is important for people with cancer because these therapies can work poorly with cancer treatments. For example, the herb known as St. John's wort interferes with various chemotherapies, making these drugs more toxic or less effective.

## **Joining a complementary therapy clinical trial**

People with cancer who would like to join a clinical trial for a complementary therapy should consider the following tips:

- Talk with your doctor about which clinical trials might be best for you.
- Find out the goal of the trial. A study about a complementary therapy and cancer may be done to prevent cancer. Or, it may be done to see if the therapy lengthens a person's life or improves a person's quality of life. These are all important goals, so it is important to know why the study is being done.
- Learn about the [informed consent](#) [7] process. During the informed consent process the doctor should discuss the following:
  - All of your possible treatment options
  - How the complementary therapy will be used in the study
  - The risks and benefits of the therapy being tested.
  - The necessary treatments, tests and/or procedures you will receive
  - How the treatment in the clinical trial differs from the standard treatment
  - Your option to withdrawal from the clinical trial at any time
- Discuss all complementary therapies or approaches with your doctor. Some therapies may not work well with other medications or cancer treatments or may have other side effects.

## **Finding a complementary therapy clinical trial**

If you're interested in finding clinical trials for complementary therapies, ask a member of your health care team or [search online](#) [8]. Search for trials using keywords such as "complementary medicine" or the name of a therapy. The National Cancer Institute's Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine (OCCAM) and the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) provide listings of current clinical trials.

### **More Information**

[Integrative Medicine](#) [9]

[Clinical Trials](#) [3]

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## Links

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/integrative-medicine/complementary-therapies-and-clinical-trials>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24863>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25071>
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