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Questions to Ask When Considering CAM [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 08/2012

Many people with cancer have questions about various treatments, techniques, or products about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) [3]. These approaches include acupuncture, herbal remedies, and meditation?anything that is not considered conventional medicine. However, before you begin any CAM therapy, it is important to first discuss all treatment options with your doctor to make sure it doesn?t interfere with your cancer treatment plan.

Evaluating CAM

It?s also important to learn how to evaluate a complementary or alternative approach in collaboration with your doctor or another member of your health care team. Although some complementary therapies have research supporting their safety and effectiveness when used with conventional cancer treatment, alternative therapies are ineffective, expensive, and may even cause harm. How are some ways to know?

First, find out who is recommending this CAM therapy. If there are only anecdotal claims (people's personal stories) and no trustworthy clinical research, the treatment probably does not treat cancer. If news or advertisements about a CAM therapy appear in mass media, but not in scientific literature, it is unlikely to help treat cancer. Learn more about evaluating medical news [4]. If a treatment promises to cure all cancers, the advertisement could be a fraud. There are more than 100 different types of cancer [5], and no single treatment will work for everyone or for every type of cancer.

Specific questions

Use the following questions to help you gather the information you need about a CAM therapy.

- What is the goal of this treatment? Does it work in combination with a standard therapy, or would it replace standard therapy?
- What research is available about this treatment?s safety?
- Does the CAM practitioner have a license or credentials relevant to their specialization?
- Is the treatment effective for my particular type of cancer? Has research to support the

effectiveness of this treatment been published in peer-reviewed medical journals?
- Is it possible to have a reaction to or side effects from this CAM therapy?
- If the therapy is used instead of a standard treatment or a clinical trial, will it delay my ability to receive standard treatment? Could this delay be harmful? Will this therapy affect the chances of being effectively treated later?
- Is the treatment being promoted only on the Internet or in paid advertisements?
- Does the treatment promise a cure for all cancers?
- Is there a clinical trial on this particular CAM therapy that I can participate in? Learn more about CAM and clinical trials [6].

Other considerations:

- The word "natural" does not guarantee "safe." For example, poisonous mushrooms are natural, but not safe. Additionally, it is possible to have toxic reactions to natural products ? even those that are safe ? particularly if they are taken in large doses.
- Many herbal therapies and dietary supplement can act like drugs in your body and cause various side effects.
- Before giving a dietary or herbal supplement to a child, talk with his or her pediatric oncologist. A child's body uses drugs and nutrients differently and requires different doses than an adult's body.

More Information

About Dietary and Herbal Supplements [7]

How to Protect Yourself from Cancer Treatment Fraud [8]

Additional Resources

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

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center: Herbs, Botanicals & Other Products: FAQs [10]

National Cancer Institute: Thinking About Complementary and Alternative Medicine [11]

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM): Are You Considering Complementary Medicine? [12]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/how-cancer-treated/complementary-and-alternative-medicine-cam/questions-ask-when-considering-cam
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25038
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24514
[5] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25040
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25039
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24559
[9] http://www.ftc.gov/curious

[10] http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11917.cfm
[11] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/thinking-about-cam
[12] http://nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/consideringcam.htm