

Natural therapies & supplements

The terms 'natural therapy', 'complementary therapy', 'complementary medicine', 'alternative medicine' and 'complementary and alternative medicine' (CAM) are often used interchangeably to describe a wide range of healthcare practises, therapies, procedures and devices that are not presently considered part of conventional medicine. These therapies include acupuncture, herbal treatments, homeopathy, naturopathy, nutrition, massage and traditional Chinese medicine.

Alternative therapies, as the name suggests, are alternatives to mainstream conventional/Western medicine. These days, this term is used less often because practitioners prefer the term 'natural therapies'. The term 'alternative medicine' can still be used when referring to a therapy that is used instead of mainstream medicine.

Natural therapies and CAM involve treating the whole person, including the underlying causes of problems and symptoms. This is why natural therapies are often called 'holistic' medicine, as they take into account other physical, mental and social factors, rather than just the symptoms of the disease.

Common natural and complementary therapies

Naturopathy

Naturopathy is an umbrella term that covers many (but not all) of the natural therapies. Formal training at private colleges and universities has influenced the way naturopathy is practised in Australia. Naturopathic training includes the study of the health sciences of anatomy, physiology, pathology and pharmacology. In recent times the practice has been more focused on herbal medicine and nutrition.

Traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a system of healthcare that includes acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, remedial massage (*anmo tuina*), exercise and breathing therapy (*qigong*), and diet and lifestyle advice. It is one of the oldest healthcare systems in the world.

In TCM, a human body has a 'life energy' or *qi*. Qi moves around the body through a network of invisible channels called meridians. In a healthy person the qi flows easily through these channels. Disease or illness is a result of inadequate supply or blocked qi in the meridians, disrupting the body's harmony, balance and order. To restore the correct flow of qi, the acupuncture practitioner inserts sterile needles at specific sites (acupuncture points) on the meridians of the client's body. Acupuncture points may also be stimulated using cupping, laser therapy, electro-stimulation, massage and moxibustion (the burning of the traditional herb mugwort, rolled into cigar shapes and placed on acupuncture points).

Chinese medicine and acupuncture are regulated professions in Australia. National registration and accreditation came in to effect in Australia in 2012, making registrations and standards mandatory.

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine is the use of medicine made exclusively from plants. This is the oldest and most widely used system of medicine in the world. In Australia the most common types of herbal medicine are Western, Chinese, Ayurvedic (Indian) and Australian Aboriginal. Herbal medicines are available in various forms. These include herbal teas, alcoholic extracts, non alcoholic glycerine extracts, powders, tablets, capsules and topical creams.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy, devised in the late 18th century by German physician Samuel Hahnemann, is based on the principle that 'like cures like' – a substance that can produce a certain set of symptoms in a healthy person will cause similar symptoms to disappear in a sick person when it is given in a highly diluted form. Homeopathy prescribing is highly specific; it is tailor-made to an individual's symptom profile. This makes it difficult to study using clinical trials because no two treatments will be the same.

Nutrition

Nutritional medicine is practised by several types of health professionals, including naturopaths, nutritionists, dietitians and integrative medical practitioners. There are, however, differences in the way nutritional knowledge is applied. It may involve:

- providing information about the types of foods that include nutrients essential for health
- identifying and correcting nutritional deficiencies
- identifying potential food intolerances related to health problems
- advising on the use of nutritional supplements.

Nutritional advice and therapy can be specific to different life stages, such as nutrition for pregnancy and breastfeeding, perimenopause, or for conditions ranging from cardiovascular disease to premenstrual syndrome (PMS).

Remedial massage

Remedial massage therapy uses therapeutic massage to treat muscle tension and injuries to tendons and ligaments. Massage techniques include relaxation, sports massage, deep tissue, shiatsu, trigger point techniques and aromatherapy (using essential oils).

Assessing risks and benefits

When choosing to use natural and complementary therapies, it is best done after being informed of the benefits and risks, and considering any scientific evidence to support their use. While some natural therapies do indeed have scientific evidence to support their use, many natural therapies have not been subject to rigorous clinical trials to evaluate their effectiveness, which is often a cause of criticism of them.

Many natural therapies, especially herbal medicines, are prescribed based on many years of traditional use. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that this long-term traditional use should not be ignored. WHO supports the appropriate use of herbal medicines and encourages the use of remedies that are proven to be safe and effective. They promote further appropriate scientific studies into herbal medicines and other CAM.

When considering using a CAM, ask the following questions to help you make an informed decision:

- What is the evidence regarding this treatment? Is it based on traditional knowledge and use? Are there clinical trials or is it just marketing hype?
- Are there any known side effects or interactions with other medications?
- Is the health practitioner appropriately trained in the natural therapy?
- Do you know what you are treating? There is a concern that when seeking CAM, and especially when self-prescribing, that a treatment may be misdiagnosed, or a treatment delayed
- Have you told your health practitioner about all the medicines you are taking, including the ones you buy over the counter?

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/natural-therapies-supplements

Updated January 2017

This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Government.

© Jean Hailes for Women's Health 2017

Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This fact sheet generally uses the terms 'women and girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

Jean Hailes
FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)
jeanhailes.org.au