



Complementary and Alternative Medicine: General Overview

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) are those medical practices not commonly used, accepted, or available as part of conventional Western medicine (the scientifically based medicine practiced by licensed medical doctors in the US), but have been widely used for thousands of years in other cultures. This brochure is designed to provide an overview of CAM and very briefly describe some of the many alternative practices and systems available and gaining popularity in the US.

Alternative Systems of Medical Practice

Alternative Systems of Medical Practice involve systems of medicine that may have been developed outside traditional Western medical practice, and include such treatments as acupuncture, homeopathy, aromatherapy, or traditional systems of medicine such as those practiced by American Indians and other native peoples throughout the world. A few of the more common practices are described in detail below.

- **Acupuncture** therapies stimulate specific areas on the skin by inserting small needles or applying heat, pressure, or massage. Acupuncture is based on the belief in a universal life force or energy field – "Qi" – that flows throughout the body. Acupuncture has been used to treat a variety of conditions, including pain, high blood pressure, arthritis, gastrointestinal problems, and addictive disorders by redirecting energy and removing barriers that may be blocking its proper flow throughout the body.
- **Acupressure**, or Chinese massage, is basically acupuncture without the needles, and consists of applying firm finger pressure to specific acupuncture points to relieve pain and discomfort throughout the body.

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- **Homeopathy** has been used to treat both short term illnesses and long term problems (such as asthma) by using very small doses of the substances that cause the problem. The theory is that these small doses will stimulate the immune system, helping the body to heal itself.
- **Naturopathy** emphasizes the need for fresh air, clean water, balanced diet, exercise, and a generally healthy lifestyle. Naturopathy often includes acupuncture, nutritional therapy, homeopathy, or dietary changes.
- **Aromatherapy** uses essential oils from plants to treat various problems such as headaches, muscle and rheumatic pain, digestive disorders, skin conditions, or stress and anxiety. These concentrated oils that have been distilled from a variety of natural substances may be inhaled or massaged into the skin.

Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine consists of natural and biologically-based practices, interventions and products to treat a variety of physical or emotional conditions. Often these are relatively minor in nature, such as nausea, coughs, colds, or diarrhea although some herbalists also attempt to treat long term or chronic conditions, such as ulcers, arthritis, or heart problems. Herbal medicine often overlaps with traditional Western use of dietary supplements and encourages the use of specific herbs, plants, or plant products to treat or prevent specific conditions.

Herbal medicine has been practiced widely in much of the world for over 4,000 years. Remedies may be given as drinks or teas, lozenges, capsules, or ointments and may be used either to treat illness or to enhance the body's ability to function well and maintain health.

Herbal medicine and supplements are generally not regulated in the US or by the Food and Drug Administration. It is important to remember that any substance powerful enough to relieve symptoms is also powerful enough to cause serious problems, especially if mixed with certain prescription medications. It's always wise to inform your physician of any herb use when being prescribed drugs.

Diet, Nutrition and Lifestyle Changes

Diet, nutrition, and lifestyle changes, while not technically an alternative medical approach can be used very effectively to prevent illness, maintain health, and possibly reverse the effects of chronic disease.

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Nutritional therapy

Nutritional therapy involves the use of specific dietary nutrients in order to improve health. A *macronutrient* approach involves tailoring and adjusting the mix of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, and fiber in your diet. This is basically adjusting how much of each of the traditional "food groups" (cereals and grains; meats and dairy products; fruits and vegetables) you eat each day.

A *micronutrient* approach involves the use of dietary supplements, usually vitamins and/or minerals. Poor eating habits and an over-reliance on a high-fat, high-calorie diet increase the risk of obesity and several diseases. Eating a more healthy diet can help prevent or control high blood pressure, heart disease, indigestion, diabetes, and obesity and may help reduce irritability, headaches, and fatigue.

A growing number of medical experts have started to emphasize diet and lifestyle as the primary means to achieve health. *Lifestyle changes* involve ongoing awareness of *how* you live, as well as a conscious commitment to some specific *health promoting* behaviors, such as regular exercise, proper diet, adequate sleep, and responsible levels of alcohol, caffeine, and drug consumption. A healthy lifestyle requires ongoing attention to five areas of optimal health: *physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual*.

Mind-Body Medicine

Mind-Body Medicine involves behavioral, psychological, social and spiritual approaches to health. Western medicine and science are increasingly confirming what Eastern and traditional medicine have known for centuries: that mood, outlook, and your general mental state can all affect your health. Mind-Body medicine asserts that mental and spiritual health can have a significant and direct impact on physical well-being, and that healthy living requires adequately managing stress and nurturing the spirit.

Categories of Mind-Body Medicine include practices such as Yoga, Tai Chi and Qigong. Many behavioral approaches, even those with a more Western scientific basis or explanation, remain Eastern in their origins. All focus on the same goal of stress management and emotional stability through mindfully slowing down and focusing on the present moment.

- **Yoga** is an all-around fitness program that combines controlled breathing, movement, and meditation. It consists of gentle, slow stretching and strengthening exercises, with moment-to-moment awareness of breathing and the sensations arising from the postures. Yoga is used for strength and flexibility, and also as a stress management technique.



- **Qigong** is a Chinese exercise system and a central component of Chinese medicine, used to build vitality and ward off disease. Qigong employs slow exercise movements, controlled breathing techniques, self-massage, and meditation. With only slight adjustments in technique, Qigong exercises can be practiced either sitting or lying down.

Meditation

Meditation is a combination of mental focus and controlled breathing to reach and maintain a relaxed mental and physical state. It has been used to treat and prevent high blood pressure, heart disease, migraine headaches, diabetes, and arthritis. It also may be effective in managing anxiety, depression, and hostility. Meditation can be done either sitting or lying down, using a variety of methods designed to keep you solidly focused in the present moment.

- **Biofeedback** uses specialized equipment to measure specific physical states and various bodily functions in order to teach you how to bring these states and functions under voluntary control. It has been used to treat muscle spasms, gastrointestinal disorders, hypertension, pain, and many other conditions.
- **Guided imagery or visualization** involves mental scenes and situations that you consciously create in order to focus your thoughts on pleasant things and not focus on stress. In doing so, your mind tells your body to relax thus relieving tension, decreasing heart rate, and reaching a calm state. These actions have successfully treated muscle spasms, chronic pain, and anxiety.

Manual Healing

Manual Healing employs the use of touch, movement and body manipulation with the hands as therapeutic tools and includes familiar and well known methods such as Chiropractic Medicine and massage and body work. The basic belief of Chiropractic is that much pain, considerable injuries, and a few internal ailments are the result of improper alignment of the bones of the spine and loss of spinal joint mobility. Misalignments are adjusted and corrected through physical manipulation, thus relieving back, neck, and shoulder pain and discomfort as well as some posture problems.

- **Therapeutic massage** consists of kneading, stroking and stretching the muscles in order to increase blood and oxygen flow to the muscles as well as to help remove various toxins from them. Therapeutic massage is used to treat chronic pain, circulatory problems, joint mobility problems, and muscle tension.
- **Manual Healing** also includes various therapies such as *Therapeutic Touch* and *Reiki*, which are said to activate or affect subtle energy fields in and around the body, as well as other lesser known therapies such as *Feldenkrais Technique* and *Rolfing*, which focus on posture and proper patterns of physical movement and alignment of the body.

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Bioelectromagnetics

Bioelectromagnetics involves the study and use of electromagnetic fields for medical purposes and often incorporates the use of magnets placed or worn on or about the body. Practitioners believe negative magnetic fields have a beneficial effect on health and that placing magnets on or near an injury or pain site encourages muscle relaxation, increases blood flow, and reduces inflammation.

Devices range from very small magnets to large machines that create strong magnetic fields. Magnet use has become very popular in recent years, in the form of bracelets, wrist bands, waist bands, undergarments, blankets and foot pads.

Do your homework!

An increasing amount of information is available about Complementary and Alternative Medicine as it gains popularity and acceptance. Look to your local library and/or the internet for more information. Do your homework in order to gain reliable information regarding various treatments or approaches. In addition, you may want to check with your doctor or other health care provider to see what she or he may know about complementary or alternative systems.

This brochure was prepared by the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Committee of Craig Hospital.