

A Parent's Guide to Complementary and Integrative Medicine



Where do you turn for help when your child gets sick? You may call your child's doctor or another health professional. You might call your mom or friend for advice. You may look on the Internet or in a magazine or book.

While most children in North America receive conventional medicine when they are sick, many parents want to know about natural therapies too. *Alternative, complementary, and integrative medicine* and *folk remedies* are some of the words used to describe these different therapies. Read on for more information.

Remember: It's very important to talk with your child's doctor about all treatments your child receives.

Terms to know

Treatments or therapies

- **Conventional medicine** describes treatments or therapies used by a medical doctor (MD), doctor of osteopathy (DO), nurse practitioner (NP), or physician assistant (PA). Other conventional health care professionals include physical therapists, psychologists, dietitians, and registered nurses. Conventional medicine is also called Western medicine or mainstream medicine. *For example, conventional therapies for cancer include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation.*
- **Alternative medicine** describes a treatment or therapy used *in place of* conventional medicine. *For example, herbal supplements are used in place of antidepressant medicine to treat depression.*
- **Complementary medicine** describes a treatment or therapy used *along with* conventional medicine. *For example, using massage or acupuncture along with medicine to treat pain.*
- **Folk medicine** describes a treatment or therapy grandparents or other elders from different cultures used. It could be a type of complementary or alternative medicine. *For example, chicken soup is used to treat a cold or flu.*

Approaches to patient care

- **Holistic medicine** describes an approach to patient care that focuses on the body, mind, and spirit of the patient as well as social and environmental aspects of health.
- **Integrative medicine** describes an approach to patient care that *uses both* conventional and complementary therapies that are safe and effective. Integrative clinicians promote health, focus on prevention, and encourage patients and their families to be part of the healing process.

Common questions

Q: Are all "natural" therapies safe?

A: No. Therapies are not safe just because they are natural. Side effects from natural therapies are rare but can occur. Check with your child's doctor before adding or changing a therapy. Talk about what you've heard and read about natural therapies. Bring the products you give your child to your next medical appointment.

Q: Does the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulate natural products?

A: Yes. The FDA regulates natural products such as dietary supplements. But they are regulated as a food and not as medicine. While most people can avoid buying rotten tomatoes or bruised fruit, it's much harder to avoid poor-quality supplements. The FDA does not guarantee the purity, potency, effectiveness, or safety of natural products sold as dietary supplements.

Q: Do natural therapies really work?

A: More research is needed for all kinds of therapies for children, including natural therapies. Some work for children with certain conditions but not for children with other conditions. This is true for conventional and natural therapies. For example, massage may help reduce stress, but it is not a cure for cancer.

Q: Do you need a special license to practice complementary medicine?

A: Each state has different licensing rules. Check with the licensing board for your state to find out if a health care professional has a license to practice. If your state does not require a license to practice (for example, some states do not license acupuncturists), be sure the professional is certified by a national professional organization. Always ask about a practitioner's training and experience. Find out if the practitioner has been specifically trained to treat children and how many children he or she treats each week.

Q: Will insurance pay for it?

A: Insurance companies and flexible medical spending accounts have many different plans that cover different things. There is often less coverage for complementary therapies than for conventional care. Check with your insurance company.

Q: Why is it important to talk with my child's doctor about these treatments?

A: Talking with your child's doctor helps you know if a treatment is safe and effective. Talk about all therapies given to your child including vitamins, herbs, or other supplements. This is especially important because there can be dangerous side effects when medicines or therapies are given at the same time. Include information about other health professionals caring for your child so care can be coordinated.

Ask all your child's health care professionals to talk with each other. Open communication is the best way to promote the safest care possible.

Q: Are there pediatricians who practice integrative medicine?

A: Yes. More and more pediatricians are offering complementary therapies and advice as part of their medical practice. They still recommend conventional therapies such as vaccines to protect children from illness. However, they also recommend and refer patients for complementary therapies such as herbs, dietary supplements, special diets, and exercise.

Q: Does the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) have members who work with complementary and integrative medicine?

A: Yes! The AAP has a Section on Complementary and Integrative Medicine that includes more than 200 pediatricians across the United States and Canada. You can find out more about this section at www.aap.org/sections/chim.

Q: Where can I find more information about complementary and integrative medicine?

A: In addition to www.aap.org/sections/chim, following are other online resources:

- US National Institutes of Health National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (<http://nccam.nih.gov>).
- Consortium of Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine (www.imconsortium.org).
- MedlinePlus from the National Institutes of Health (<http://medlineplus.gov>). This site includes information on dietary supplements as well as medications and common medical conditions.

Remember

Talk with your child's doctor about *all* treatments your child is using. This includes home remedies, over-the-counter remedies, and dietary supplements such as vitamins or herbs. Also tell your child's doctor if your child has seen any other health care professionals. Your child's health and well-being depend on open communication, trust, and respect among all health professionals.

Please note: Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this publication. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

