

# Integrative and Complementary Therapies

Many people use complementary therapies during or after their breast cancer care. They are used along with (not instead of) standard medical treatments. These treatments can include surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, targeted therapy and hormone therapy. They offer people the chance to try therapies outside standard medical care. When complementary therapies are combined with standard medical care, they may be called integrative therapies. These therapies do not treat breast cancer itself. Yet, they may help improve quality of life. Some may relieve side effects of treatment or the cancer itself.

## Types of integrative and complementary therapies

**Natural products** use herbs, vitamins, minerals or microorganisms (such as the bacteria found in yogurt). Examples include black cohosh, melatonin and probiotics.

**Mind and body medicine** use techniques to help the mind affect body function. Examples include:

- meditation
- prayer
- music therapy (expressing your feelings through music)
- guided imagery (imagining your body fighting the cancer and healing itself)
- aromatherapy (using fragrances to help you feel calm, relaxed or energized)
- art therapy (expressing your feelings through art)

**Manipulative and body-based practices** use movement and manipulation of the body. They include:

- massage and chiropractic medicine
- acupuncture (using needles to stimulate certain points on the body)
- acupressure (using finger pressure on specific areas throughout the body)
- reflexology (using touch to stimulate points on your feet)
- therapeutic touch (re-balancing the body's energy fields through touch)

**Movement and energy medicine** use external electromagnetic fields on the body's assumed energy field. Examples include Reiki, qi gong and therapeutic touch.

**Whole medical systems** use many therapies from the categories listed above. Some are traditional forms of healing. They are often a different way of thinking about disease and about life. For example:

- Ayurveda (an Indian system that brings the body into harmony with its environment)
- traditional Chinese medicine (which stresses the importance of balancing energy forces)
- homeopathic medicine and naturopathy

## Safety of integrative and complementary therapies

Safety is a concern for both standard medical treatments and complementary therapies. Unlike standard medicine, many therapies are not regulated by the federal government. So, they may not follow the same safety standards. You should approach any complementary therapy with caution. Some have a good safety record. Others are known to be unsafe. For others, we simply don't know. Therapies that are believed to be safe may not be safe for everyone. Some can be harmful for people going through cancer treatment.

Before using any complementary therapy, talk to your doctor.

## Is complementary therapy right for you?

### STEP 1: Talk with your health care provider

If you think you might use a complementary therapy, don't decide alone. Your doctor can help make sure they are okay to use during standard treatment. You and your doctor can make informed decisions about what's best for you.

## STEP 2: Use a complementary therapy only as an addition to standard treatment

Complementary therapies should never be used instead of or apart from standard medical care. Standard cancer treatments have proven benefits. It may not be safe to replace standard treatment with less-studied complementary therapies.

While they should not be used in place of standard medical treatments, some complementary therapies have become accepted as an integrated part of medical care, for example, acupuncture or massage.

## STEP 3: Take the initiative

When considering a complementary therapy, learn all you can about it. Research its safety and effectiveness. Note any harmful interactions with standard cancer treatments or other complementary therapies.

## STEP 4: Be wary of wild claims

No complementary therapy has been proven to cure cancer. If this claim is made, it is a sign the product could be unsafe and not effective. Be sure to look to see what research has been done. Your doctor is a good source of this information.

## STEP 5: Don't equate "natural" with "safe"

Natural does not mean safe. Think about poison ivy, poisonous mushrooms and rattlesnakes.

## STEP 6: Choose reputable brands

With dietary supplements, there's little guarantee that what is on the label is what's actually inside the bottle. Choose supplements from well known makers. It may increase the likelihood that the:

- supplement listed on the label is what is inside the bottle
- dose and potency are listed correctly
- supplement is free of harmful contents, like pesticides and heavy metals (such as lead, arsenic or mercury)

## STEP 7: Choose licensed complementary therapy practitioners

Visiting a licensed practitioner isn't a guarantee you'll get good, safe care. Still, a license to practice does show that a provider has passed the requirements in their field.

## Questions to ask your doctor

How do you feel about complementary therapies?

Have you ever referred someone to a complementary therapy practitioner?

What's the best way to find a licensed complementary therapy practitioner?

I am using these complementary therapies (name therapies). Should I stop using them during and/or after my breast cancer treatment?

Should I let you know before I start a new complementary therapy? Which therapies should I not use?

Is this complementary therapy (name therapy) safe? Is there research showing it is safe?

Are there side effects with this complementary therapy (name therapy)?

Are there clinical trials studying this complementary therapy (name therapy)?

## Resources

### Organizations

Susan G. Komen®  
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)  
1-888-463-6332      [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) at the National Institutes of Health  
1-888-644-6226      <http://nccam.nih.gov>

NIH Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS)  
1-301-435-2920      [www.ods.od.nih.gov](http://www.ods.od.nih.gov)

### Internet

HealthWorld Online  
[www.healthy.net](http://www.healthy.net)

M.D. Anderson  
[www.mdanderson.org/departments/cimer](http://www.mdanderson.org/departments/cimer)

Memorial Sloan-Kettering  
[www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm](http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm)

Natural Standard  
[www.naturalstandard.com](http://www.naturalstandard.com)

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