



Conventional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine What's it all about?

(Part 1 of 2 part series)

The terms associated with treatments and therapies are bantered around with great abandon in magazines, newspapers and articles sometimes leaving your head whirling when trying to determine whether to use them. Regardless of what decision you make regarding trying any of these approaches, **discuss them with your regular physician first**. There can be interactions with current therapy you have prescribed or there may be contraindications for their use with your diagnosis.

What are the differences between conventional, complementary and alternative medicine?

Conventional medicine is what you are most likely familiar with. Conventional medicine includes treatments prescribed or carried out by medical doctors, doctors of osteopathy or allied health professionals such as a dietician, physical therapist, nurse, mental health counselor or other members of the health team who primarily deliver care in a hospital, clinic or physicians offices. In other words it is the most widely accepted form of medicine used in Western culture. It is considered beneficial based on having been thoroughly researched and tested to ensure the practices prescribed are safe and effective.

Complementary medicine is used in **addition** to conventional medicine such as the use of relaxation techniques, meditation

and massage therapy in conjunction with prescribed medications to treat stress and anxiety.

Alternative medicine is generally used as a **replacement** for conventional medicine and focuses on the body's ability to heal itself. A lot of times persons practicing alternative medicine refer to themselves as a mentor or teacher because they view their role more as a coach who helps you to heal the body naturally. The distinction between complementary and alternative medicine is blurry and therefore they are often referred to as CAM (Complementary Alternative Medicine). When all three approaches (conventional, alternative and complementary) are combined the term integrated medicine is used.

Basic premises related to the use of alternative and complementary approaches are:

- it is best to maintain ones health by preventing disease
- an individual needs to be coached or mentored to learn strategies to allow the body to heal itself using it's natural healing power
- the whole person needs to be treated by incorporating mental (emotional), social-relational, physical and spiritual needs
- energy flow must be maintained properly for health to be established or maintained
- it is necessary to bring harmony between the mind and body systems to create a healthy state (Examples of this would include hypnosis, biofeedback, yoga, music and dance therapies.)

Examples of practices that may be used in conjunction with (complementary) or as an alternative (replacement) for conventional (Western) medicine include: acupuncture, therapeutic touch, homeopathy, biofeedback, chiropractic and naturopathy.

- Acupuncture has been practiced in China and Asian countries for thousands of years. It involves the insertion of thin needles through the skin into identified puncture points to stimulate body healing. Acupuncture to be effective brings about a balance in the vital energy flow (qi) between the yin (cold, passive force) and yang (hot, excited, active) fields within the body. Restoration of one's health occurs when a healthy balance of the vital energy flow is established within the body by means of puncturing the vital points where meridians in the body are located. The person performing the acupuncture needs extensive training before attempting to use this method of healing.
- Therapeutic touch allows the therapist to move his/her hands over the individual's body to direct the flow of "chi" or "prana" energy (energy sources) to create healing in the patient.
- Homeopathy is the use of specifically formulated drugs prepared in extremely low (miniscule) concentrations to produce the same symptoms as the disease itself. The basic premise of homeopathy is it stimulates the individual's immune system to cure the disease. Research studies on the use of homeopathic preparations are **inconsistent** therefore before rushing into the use of homeopathic drugs it is important to **talk to your personal physician** and do some self investigation of the benefits and risks. Using homeopathy does not mean you should give up conventional treatment of all diseases therefore it is important to work cooperatively with your family physician, if deciding to try this approach.
- Biofeedback uses relaxation and imagery to treat stress or anxiety type situations.
- Chiropractic therapy focuses on diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mechanical disorders of the musculoskeletal system through the use of manipulation, exercise and various types of counseling. It is based on a theory that nerve impulses must be able to flow freely along the spinal cord therefore if the spinal column is out of alignment (subluxation) it interrupts the natural flow of the nerves and this produces disease. Subluxation from a chiropractic perspective is a slight misalignment of the vertebrae whereas an orthopedic subluxation is more severe and indicates a partial dislocation of the bone (visible on x-ray) that produces pain and limits range of motion. Some, not all chiropractors extend the subluxation theory to include the treatment of digestive problems, asthma, ear infections and allergies. However the use of subluxation to treat these conditions is not universally accepted among chiropractors nor medical doctors.
- Naturopathy uses noninvasive treatments to assist the body to heal itself. Examples include massage therapy, exercise, colonic cleansing, relaxation therapy, and herbal remedies may or may not be prescribed in this class of treatments.

Next: Part 2: *How to Evaluate Your Choices before Undertaking Alternative or Complementary Forms of Medicine*

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