

Complementary Medicine: What is it? Does it work and what is the evidence?

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Medicine is defined as “the art or science of the prevention and cure of disease. Complementary Medicine is consistent with this definition. The terms Complementary Medicine (CM) and Alternative Medicine are often used synonymously. The usage of these terms is constantly changing. CM usually refers to "interventions neither taught widely in medical schools nor generally available in public hospitals".

CM practices include many diverse treatments and philosophies. They include nutritional supplements, acupuncture, homeopathy, music therapy, energy medicine, yoga, meditation and many more. Therapies are often derived from the medical practices of other cultures such as Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic (Indian Medicine) and Native American traditions. Newer approaches utilise technological advances via laser, magnetic and electrical devices. As well as treatments there are CM diagnostic tests such as live blood analysis and electrodermal testing.

Worldwide CM is the most utilised form of medicine and traditionally was the natural medicine practised in local communities. CM has always been practised in Western cultures . After being dormant in the West during the 40s, 50s and 60s it has resurfaced in the last decades.

The increasing use of CM in our society parallels the shift in people's expectations of the health care system. CM is characterised by addressing the whole person and not just the disease. Its philosophy emphasizes health and healing using bio-psycho-socio-spiritual dimensions as primary goals. It contrasts with the often impersonal, mechanistic and reductionist approach of mainstream medicine which relies on group data for evidence of benefit and primarily focuses on the disease process.

What is and what is not CM is constantly changing. Mainstream medicine has started to embrace the health enhancing role of human relationships, the need for human comfort and the critical role of the patient-practitioner relationship. Dealing with the psychosocial, mind, body and spiritual needs of an individual is no longer the province of CM practitioners but just good medicine now taught in medical schools and practised widely.

Does CM work in Bone and Joint diseases?

CM is incorporated into mainstream medicine when there is proven evidence of benefit. Some CM practices are now widely accepted in the management of bone and joint conditions such as rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, chronic pain and fibromyalgia. **Nutrition** including adequate calcium and Vitamin D for osteoporosis prevention and a Mediterranean diet high in beta-carotene for osteoarthritis prevention are now accepted. In rheumatoid arthritis nutrition advice including the use of omega 3 fatty acids for treatment of symptoms is part of standard mainstream management.

There is increasing evidence that glucosamine and chondroitin sulphate, and a variety of herbs provide benefit in osteoarthritis. **Exercise therapy** including Yoga, Pilates , Tai Chi and Feldenkrais are widely prescribed for musculoskeletal pain and dysfunction and falls prevention. **Meditation** for chronic pain and acupuncture for acute musculoskeletal conditions are well established evidence- based practices. The list of CM therapies and diagnostic methods with proven efficacy is long and is growing.

The application of complete medical systems such as Traditional Chinese Medicine or Ayurvedic Medicine for treatment of specific disease states has not been evaluated using modern scientific evaluation methods. Their benefits and safety in bone and joint diseases remains unproven.

What should the consumer do?

In our society where economics drive the health agenda we must remember CM is big business. The "snake oil" salesman/practitioner exists. As a consumer you need to be informed of the evidence relating to benefit ,cost and safety of a particular therapy, CM or mainstream. Develop a relationship with a health professional who is prepared to assist you in evaluating such evidence. It is unlikely that there is one way or one product that will make the difference to a single health problem and if it sounds too good to be true it usually is.

In making health choices evaluate what you chose to do against the background of the World Health Organization's definition of health that equates health with well-being: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."