

Complementary therapies and cancer



At some stage you may hear about, or become interested in, complementary therapies. There are many therapies on offer and information about these can be confusing. This fact sheet will give you ideas about how to make informed and safe choices.

What are conventional cancer therapies?

These are treatments that are evidence based and scientifically proven to be safe and effective. They are designed to diagnose and treat cancer, slow its growth, or provide relief from symptoms. The main conventional treatments are surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy and immunotherapy. They are often referred to as mainstream or conventional medical treatments.

What are complementary therapies?

Complementary therapies are used together with conventional medical treatments. Complementary therapies aim to support and enhance the quality of life of a person and improve their well-being. They do not aim to cure the person's cancer. Instead they are used to help control symptoms such as pain and fatigue and complement conventional medical treatments. Complementary therapies include relaxation, talking therapies, meditation, visualisation, acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, music therapy, art therapy and massage.

Some complementary therapies may not be recommended during your treatment phase as they interfere with your treatment and/or worsen side-effects. Always discuss with your doctor before commencing any complementary therapy.

What are alternative therapies?

Alternative therapies are used instead of conventional medical treatments. Alternative therapies are often promoted as "cancer cures". It is important to be aware that they are unproven and have not been scientifically tested. Alternative therapies may cause harm or suffering to those who use them instead of conventional medical treatments. Examples of alternative therapies include naturopathy, immune therapy, homeopathy, Chinese herbs and megavitamins.

What types of complementary therapies are available for cancer patients?

The following complementary therapies are those most often used by people with cancer. You may choose to use one or more of the therapies.

Touch therapies involve working with the physical body and include acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology and massage.

Mind body therapies are designed to enhance the mind's capacity to affect the body's function and symptoms and include meditation, guided imagery and hypnosis.

Talking therapies provide you with an opportunity for emotional support. This can be one-on-one with a trained counselor, or in a group of people who come together to share their experiences and offer support to each other. There are also "peer support" programs that involve one-on-one support between you or your family and another volunteer who has had a similar experience.

Lifestyle approaches such as a healthy diet and regular exercise may help you feel better or help to relieve some of your symptoms such as fatigue.

What should I do before considering a complementary therapy?

Take charge of your health by finding out as much information as you can about the therapy. You may want to ask the following questions:

- Is this therapy specifically used for cancer patients or is it used for other diseases?
- Are there any side-effects?
- Who will be involved in delivering the therapy?
- What are their qualifications and are they registered with a professional organisation?
- What are the costs of the therapy and are they covered by my health insurance provider?
- What does the therapy aim to achieve?
- Will this therapy affect my conventional medical treatment?

You should always feel safe, comfortable and respected whenever you are undertaking any form of complementary therapy. Your state or territory Cancer Council may offer a range of complementary therapies and can assist in answering any questions you may have.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website

(with links to state and territory Cancer Councils)

www.cancer.org.au