



# International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders

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**CAM (700)**

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## What is Complimentary Alternative Medicine (CAM)?

Sources: NIH, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM),  
Publication No. D347 Updated April 2010; Publication No. D417, Created October 2008;  
and NCCAM Publication No. D426, 2010.

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices to maintain health or treat symptoms or illness is often controversial. Yet people all over the globe use CAM therapies. While some CAM therapies are questionable, others are accepted and employed by conventional health care providers. This publication presents an overview of CAM, types of CAM, and summary information on safety and regulation.

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# What Is Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)?

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*Editor's Note: The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices to maintain health or treat symptoms or illness is often controversial. As pointed out in this article, rigorous, well-designed clinical trials for many CAM therapies are often lacking; therefore, the safety and effectiveness of many CAM therapies are uncertain. Regulations (if they exist at all) for CAM practices and practitioners are less stringent than those found in conventional medicine. Safety and effectiveness are not always known. Care must be taken to recognize false or misleading claims. Yet people all over the globe use CAM therapies; more than one-third of U.S. adults are using some form of CAM. While some CAM therapies are questionable, others are accepted and employed by conventional health care providers. Be sure to tell your doctor about any CAM use.*

## Introduction

Like many people, you may be using or considering some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). If so, it is a good idea to talk with your health care providers about your CAM use. This article presents an overview of CAM, types of CAM, and summary information on safety and regulation.

## Defining CAM

Defining CAM is difficult, because the field is very broad and constantly changing. The NIH National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) defines CAM as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine. Conventional medicine (also called Western or allopathic medicine) is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) and D.O. (doctor of osteopathy) degrees, and by allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists, and registered nurses. The boundaries between CAM and conventional medicine are not absolute, and specific CAM practices may, over time, become widely accepted.

**Complementary medicine** refers to use of CAM *together with* conventional medicine. Most use of CAM by Americans is complementary.

**Alternative medicine** refers to use of CAM *in place of* conventional medicine.

**Integrative medicine** refers to a practice that combines both conventional and CAM treatments for which there is evidence of safety and effectiveness.

## Types of CAM

CAM practices are often grouped into broad categories, such as natural products, mind-body medicine, and manipulative and body-based practices. Although these categories are not formally defined, they are useful for discussing CAM practices. Some CAM practices may fit into more than one category.

### Natural Products

This area of CAM includes use of a variety of herbal medicines (also known as botanicals), vitamins, minerals, and other “natural products.” Many are sold over the counter as dietary supplements.

CAM “natural products” also include probiotics – live microorganisms (usually bacteria) that are similar to microorganisms normally found in the human digestive tract and that may have beneficial effects. Probiotics are available in foods (e.g., yogurts) or as dietary supplements.

### Mind-Body Medicine

Mind-body practices focus on the interactions among the brain, mind, body, and behavior, with the intent to use the mind to affect physical functioning and promote health. Many CAM practices embody this concept – in different ways.

- **Meditation** is a conscious mental process using certain techniques to suspend the stream of thoughts and relax the body and mind. Techniques include specific postures, focused attention, or an open attitude toward distractions. People use meditation to increase calmness and relaxation, improve psychological balance, cope with illness, or enhance overall health and well-being.
- The various styles of **yoga** used for health purposes typically combine physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation or relaxation. People use yoga as part of a general health regimen, and also for a variety of health conditions.
- **Acupuncture** is a family of procedures involving the stimulation of specific points on the body using a variety of techniques, such as penetrating the skin with needles that are then manipulated by hand or by electrical stimulation. It is one of the key components of traditional Chinese medicine.

Other examples of mind-body practices include deep-breathing exercises, guided imagery, hypnotherapy, progressive relaxation, qi gong, and tai chi.

## Manipulative and Body-Based Practices

Manipulative and body-based practices focus primarily on the structures and systems of the body, including the bones and joints, soft tissues, and circulatory and lymphatic systems. Two commonly used therapies fall within this category:

- **Spinal manipulation** practitioners use their hands or a device to apply a controlled force to a joint of the spine, moving it beyond its passive range of motion; the amount of force applied depends on the form of manipulation used.
- **Massage therapy** encompasses many different techniques. In general, therapists press, rub, and otherwise manipulate the muscles and other soft tissues of the body. People use massage for a variety of health-related purposes.

## Other CAM Practices

CAM also encompasses **movement therapies** – a broad range of Eastern and Western movement-based approaches used to promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Examples include Feldenkreis method, Alexander technique, Pilates, and Trager psychophysical integration.

Practices of **traditional healers** can also be considered a form of CAM. Traditional healers use methods based on indigenous theories, beliefs, and experiences handed down from generation to generation. A familiar example in the U.S. is the Native American healer.

Some CAM practices involve manipulation of various **energy** fields to affect health. These practices generally reflect the concept that human beings are infused with subtle forms of energy that can be re-directed for health and well being. Light therapy, qi gong, Reiki, and healing touch are examples of such practices.

Finally, **whole medical systems**, which are complete systems of theory and practice that have evolved over time in different cultures and apart from conventional or Western medicine, may be considered CAM. Examples of ancient whole medical systems include Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine.

## A Note about Safety and Effectiveness

Rigorous, well-designed clinical trials for many CAM therapies are often lacking; therefore, the safety and effectiveness of many CAM therapies are uncertain. NCCAM is sponsoring research designed to fill this knowledge gap by building a scientific evidence base about CAM therapies...

- whether they are safe
- whether they work for the conditions for which people use them
- if they work, how they work

As with any medical treatment, there can be risks with CAM therapies.

These general precautions can help to minimize risks:

- Select CAM practitioners with care. Find out about the practitioner's training and experience.
- Be aware that some dietary supplements may interact with medications or other supplements, may have side effects of their own, or may contain potentially harmful ingredients not listed on the label. Also keep in mind that most supplements have not been tested in pregnant women, nursing mothers, or children.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. Bring a list of everything you use, keep a record of the information you receive, and ask questions if something is unclear. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

## Dietary Supplements

Many people take dietary supplements in an effort to be well and stay healthy. These are products that contain vitamins, minerals, herbs or other botanicals, amino acids, enzymes, and/or other ingredients intended to supplement the diet. In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has special labeling requirements for dietary supplements and treats them as foods, not drugs. Federal regulations for dietary supplements are very different from those for prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

Here are some key points to be aware of:

- Dietary supplement manufacturers do not have to prove a product's safety and effectiveness before it is marketed.
- If you are thinking about using a dietary supplement, first get information on it from reliable sources (health care professionals).
- Dietary supplements may interact with medications or other dietary supplements.
- Dietary supplements may contain ingredients not listed on the label.

## Safety Considerations of Dietary Supplements

Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use, including dietary supplements. If you are taking a dietary supplement, **read the label instructions**. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions, particularly about the best dosage for you to take. If you experience any side effects that concern you, stop taking the dietary supplement, and contact your health care provider.

Keep in mind that although many dietary supplements (and some prescription drugs) come from natural sources, **“natural” does not always mean “safe.”** Also, a manufacturer’s use of the term “standardized” (or “verified” or “certified”) does *not* necessarily guarantee product quality or consistency.

Be aware that **an herbal supplement may contain dozens of compounds** and that its active ingredients **may not be known**. Researchers are studying many of these products in an effort to identify active ingredients and understand their effects in the body. Also consider the possibility that what’s on the label may *not* be what’s in the bottle. Analyses of dietary supplements sometimes find differences between labeled and actual ingredients.

For example:

- An herbal supplement may not contain the correct plant species.
- The amount of the active ingredient may be lower or higher than the label states. That means you may be taking less – or more – of the dietary supplement than you realize.
- The dietary supplement may be contaminated with other herbs, pesticides, or metals, or even adulterated with unlabeled ingredients such as prescription drugs.

For current information from the Federal Government on the safety of particular dietary supplements, check the “Dietary Supplement and Safety Information” section of the FDA web site: [www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/Alerts/](http://www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/Alerts/) or the “Alerts and Advisories” section of the NCCAM web site at: [nccam.nih.gov/news/alerts](http://nccam.nih.gov/news/alerts).

### **If You are Using or Considering a CAM Approach, Talk With Your Health Care Providers**

- Some CAM approaches can have an effect on conventional medicines. Talking with your health care providers about your CAM use will help ensure coordinated and safe care.
- Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers can help you decide whether a particular CAM therapy is right for you. They can answer questions, suggest reliable sources of information, and point out potential benefits and risks.
- Giving your health-care team a complete picture of *everything* you do to take care of your health makes them your fully informed partners – and it helps **you** stay in control of your own health care.

### **NCCAM Clearinghouse**

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) Clearinghouse provides information on CAM, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

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E-mail: [info@nccam.nih.gov](mailto:info@nccam.nih.gov)

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