

# Complementary and Alternative Medicine



A guide for people affected by cancer



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#### **Publications Statement**

The Cancer Society's aim is to provide easy-to-understand and accurate information on cancer and its treatments. Our *Living with Cancer* information booklets are reviewed every four years by cancer doctors, specialist nurses, and other relevant health professionals to ensure the information is reliable, evidence-based, and up-to-date. The booklets are also reviewed by consumers to ensure they meet the needs of people with cancer and their carers.

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## Complementary and Alternative Medicine

This booklet uses the terms medicines, methods, treatments and therapies interchangeably to describe complementary and alternative medicine.

Being diagnosed with cancer is a difficult time and it may feel like things are out of control. Most people proceed with treatments prescribed by their medical team and do not wish to explore other treatments. Some consider other forms of treatment to add to or replace their conventional medical care (offered by their doctors) as a way of feeling more in control.

This booklet has been written to provide you with information about complementary and alternative therapies (CAM).



## What are complementary and alternative medicines?

Although often used interchangeably, the terms complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) are very different.

**Complementary medicines** are used along side your conventional treatment to help you feel better and cope with your treatment. A complementary therapist will not claim to be able to cure your cancer.

**Alternative medicines** are those offered instead of your conventional cancer treatment. Often, alternative medicines carry claims that they will cure your cancer or work better than your regular cancer treatment. There is no scientific evidence to support such claims. Conventional cancer treatments have undergone years of scientific research and testing to prove they work. In rejecting conventional treatment and choosing alternative medicine you may risk your chances of recovery.





## How can complementary medicines help?

Complementary therapies can help you to cope with your cancer treatment by:

- Improving your quality of life.
- Improving your general health and well-being.
- Giving you a sense of control during your cancer experience.
- Helping control anxiety, stress, insomnia, and depression.
- Helping reduce symptoms of cancer and side-effects of chemotherapy or radiation treatment, for example, pain, nausea, loss of appetite, breathlessness, constipation, diarrhoea, or fatigue.

## Some medicines may seriously interact with conventional treatments.

Discuss any therapies with your doctor and tell your CAM therapist about any conventional cancer treatments you're receiving.

## Do alternative therapies help?

Alternative therapies are used in place of conventional medical treatments. Many of these therapies do not have the support of health professionals due to their lack of robust evidence to indicate their success. The Cancer Society of New Zealand does not recommend using alternative therapies in place of conventional treatments. If you are considering alternative therapy we encourage you to discuss your options with your doctor.



## What are the different types of complementary therapies?

There are many complementary therapies that can be used with conventional treatments, and we are learning more about different therapies. These therapies can be classified into five categories:

### Body-based therapies

Body therapies work by manipulating part of your body. Commonly used examples include:

**Gentle massage:** used to stimulate circulation, increase suppleness, relieve tension and reduce stress.

**Reflexology:** a technique that uses pressure points on the feet and hands to relieve pain felt in various parts of the body.



**Osteopathy:** therapy based on restoring health through manipulating the skeleton and muscles to alleviate pain and promote well-being.

**Chiropractic therapy:** based on the interactions of the spine and nervous system. This therapy is based on manipulating segments of the spinal column.

For pain management “evidence does not support chiropractic manipulation for cancer patients”.\*

\* Cassileth, Barrie et al. 'Complementary therapies for cancer pain.' In *Current Pain and Headache Reports*. Volume 11, Number 4. New York: Current Medicine Group LLC, 2007.

### Mind-body therapies

These therapies come from the belief that you can affect the health of your body through the power of your mind.

Commonly used examples are:

**Hypnosis:** use of suggestion in the subconscious mind to influence healing or mental well-being.

**Art therapy:** a type of psychotherapy that uses creative outlets to help manage emotions.

**Meditation:** relaxation and breathing techniques to relieve tension and anxiety.

**Yoga:** the use of stretches and poses with an emphasis placed on breathing to achieve strength and control of the body and mind as well as a state of tranquillity.

**Biofeedback:** use of technology, such as heart rate monitors to teach patients how certain body functions are affected by their environment.



### Biologically-based therapies

This is the use of naturally occurring substances. Commonly used examples are vitamins, special diets and herbs.

Describing a product as ‘natural’ doesn't mean it is safe to use. Herbal supplements can act like drugs and may be harmful when taken on their own, or in conjunction with other substances. High doses of vitamins may also have an effect on your conventional treatment. It's important your doctor knows if you are using any natural substances.

## Energy-based therapies

These therapies are based on the belief that the body is made up of energy fields that can be used to heal or promote wellness. Examples include:

**Reiki and Therapeutic touch:** the belief is that therapists balance inner vital energy by using their hands to move over energy fields in the patient's body.

**Tai Chi:** a Chinese martial art combining controlled breathing, concentration and balance with slow and gentle movements.

## Traditional Medicines

New Zealand and many other countries have cultural beliefs and practices that have developed over time. These are generally whole-person healing systems. Common examples in this country include:

**Māori Medicine:** traditional indigenous healing using Rongoā and Mirimiri (medicine and healing therapies) based on the healing properties of New Zealand native plants and modalities.

**Acupuncture:** an ancient Chinese practice that uses small needles to stimulate points on the body to promote healing, relieve pain and nausea.

**Homeopathy:** based on the theory of 'treating like with like'. To treat an illness, a homeopathic therapist (homeopath) uses tiny doses of a substance that in large doses would actually cause the symptoms of the illness.

Homeopathic remedies are made from plant, mineral and animal substances. They are diluted and shaken vigorously many times until there is little, if any, of the original substance left. Homeopaths believe that the original substance somehow leaves a molecular 'blueprint' in the water that triggers your body's healing mechanisms.

*Source: CancerHelpUK-2009*

**Naturopathy:** an approach to medicine that emphasises the ability of the body to heal itself. Naturopaths use a variety of other therapies, including herbal medicines, homeopathy and counselling.

## Do you need to tell your doctor about any CAM you are using?

Some patients do not discuss CAM with their doctors as they feel their doctor may react negatively.

Doctors now recognise that patients want to explore other options and are willing to discuss this with you.

Doctors can only prescribe medicines that have been well-tried and tested. They sometimes have concerns that people spend a lot of money on treatments that have no proven benefit, or even the potential to do harm and affect conventional cancer therapies.

People may choose to delay treatment in favour of CAM and may miss the opportunity to get the best possible result from their treatment.



### How do you choose a CAM practitioner?

Each therapy has different standards and regulations that qualified therapists must adhere to. Ask to see your practitioner's qualifications and if they are registered with any national organisation. The therapist you choose should be someone you trust and feel comfortable with.

You should let your CAM practitioner know about the conventional treatment you are receiving so they can tailor therapies appropriately.

### How much does CAM cost?

Some complementary therapies can be expensive. Make sure that you ask how much the therapy will cost before you make your decision. It is also worthwhile asking your cancer care team if the hospital, Cancer Society or hospice offer any complementary therapies as this may save you money.

### Where can you get more information?

Your doctor may be able to point you in the direction of reputable complementary therapists.

The internet may be helpful in your search for information on CAM. However, it is important that the information you base your decisions on comes from a trustworthy source.

The Cancer Society has compiled a database of sources that may be useful in your search. The CAM database includes a summary of each website and a rating evaluating the resource (see example below).

To access the database go to **[www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)**  
For more information contact the **Cancer Information Helpline 0800 CANCER (266 237)**.

Example from our CAM database:

- 1** National Cancer Institute  
<http://www.cancer.gov/>  
A guide for those with cancer who are considering CAM. Very thorough and balanced overview.
- 3** Alternative Health Professionals  
<http://www.alternativehealthprofessionals.co.nz/>  
No cancer specific information and not many references included. However, does provide links to New Zealand practitioners of various therapies.

## 1 American Cancer Society

<http://www.cancer.org/>

A very thorough overview of CAM with good information on treatments. Some good advice given to those searching for a CAM practitioner that translates well to the New Zealand setting.

## 2 Tairawhiti Complementary and Traditional Therapies Research Trust

<http://www.complementary.org.nz>

This database aims to enable people to make an informed choice about complementary and traditional therapies through a robust evidence base of effectiveness.

### Key to the CAM database

**1 Evidence-based, medically sound, well-referenced.**

**2 Evidence-based, open to medical debate, adequately referenced.**

**3 Some evidence provided, medically questionable, little referencing.**

**4 Little or no evidence, medically unsound, few or no references.**

The suggested websites are not maintained by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. We only suggest sites we believe offer credible and responsible information, but we cannot guarantee that the information on such websites is correct, up-to-date or evidence-based medical information.

We suggest you discuss any information you find with your cancer care health professionals.

### Information, support, and research

The Cancer Society of New Zealand offers information and support services to people affected by cancer. Printed material is available on specific cancers and treatments. Information for living with cancer is also available.

The Cancer Society is a major funder of cancer research in New Zealand. The aim of research is to determine the causes, prevention, and effective methods of treating various types of cancer.

The Society also undertakes health promotion through programmes, such as those encouraging SunSmart behaviour, healthy eating, physical activity, and discouraging smoking.

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### We appreciate your support

Many Cancer Society services would not be possible without the generous support of many New Zealanders. You can make a donation by phoning **0900 31 111**, through our website at [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz) or by contacting your local Cancer Society.





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# ANY QUESTION, ANY CANCER 0800 CANCER (226 237) Cancer Information Helpline

