

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is a large group of different medical and health care systems, practices and products. These methods are focused on preventative care and pain management. They are not considered to be part of allopathic (“conventional” or “Western”) medicine. While there is scientific evidence supporting some CAM therapies, there are still key questions that need to be studied. These questions include whether these therapies are safe, their interactions with other medicines and their effectiveness.

You should always speak with your health care provider before adding any CAM therapies to your treatment plan. You may also want to consult with a professional who understands both conventional medicine and CAM.



Here’s a guide to the terms complementary, alternative and integrative medicine.

- **Complementary medicine** is used together with conventional medicine.
- **Alternative medicine** is used in place of conventional medicine.
- **Integrative medicine** is a combination of conventional medicine with complementary or alternative therapies. This can include nutrition, herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, biofeedback, yoga or stress reduction techniques. While similar to CAM, integrative medicine depends on a partnership between the patient and the health care provider. Both work together to treat the mind, body and spirit.

What are some types of CAM therapies?

Natural products include herbs, vitamins and minerals, probiotics and specific dietary methods. Natural therapies for treating psoriasis also include sunlight, climatotherapy and balneotherapy.

- **Balneotherapy** is soaking in mineral water baths or pools. Mineral waters have been reported to have therapeutic benefits. It also can help hydrate, soften the skin and break down plaques.
- **Climatotherapy** combines natural sunlight and bodies of water to treat psoriasis.
- **Diet and nutrition** have been reported to help with psoriatic symptoms. Can changing your diet or cutting out certain foods improve your symptoms? Currently, there’s no clear answer. The goal in changing your diet is to get to and stay at a healthy weight. This will help to reduce the severity of your symptoms and lower your risk for related diseases. You can speak to a registered dietitian or nutritionist to help create a dietary plan that fits your needs.
- **Physical activity** is important for overall health. This can also help you reach a healthy weight and lower your risk for comorbidities such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Activities as simple as walking or stretching can have benefits. Talk with your health care provider about how to start a plan for physical activity for your psoriatic disease.
- **Sunlight** exposure in small amounts on affected skin can help reduce psoriasis symptoms.

Mind and body practices are methods that are thought to benefit overall health.

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy** is based on the idea that your thoughts cause your feelings and behaviors. Changing the way you think can change how you act or feel. For example, if you focus on thinking positively about your disease, it might help you feel better.
- **Massage** therapy is a group of methods that includes Swedish massage, deep tissue, reflexology, shiatsu and acupuncture. It is commonly used to relieve muscle tension, reduce stress and help increase relaxation.
- **Meditation** helps you focus your attention and stop anxious thinking. This results in relaxation, mental calmness and balance for your mind and emotions. Mindfulness is a key part to meditation. Being mindful is becoming and remaining aware of what is going on with you inside and out to better treat your pain. You can benefit from as little as 5 to 10 minutes of meditation per day.
- **Support group** members provide each other with many types of help, such as providing and figuring out information, sharing personal experiences, and offering comfort and encouragement. A support group can also help to inform the public or take part in advocacy.

Other

- **Ayurvedic medicine** treats the body as a whole and not just the symptoms of an illness. This works by trying to balance the body, mind and spirit.
- **Homeopathy** takes a different approach from mainstream medicine in diagnosing, classifying and treating health problems. Like Ayurvedic medicine, homeopathy also treats the body as a whole.
- **Naturopathy**, also called naturopathic medicine, focuses on supporting overall health rather than just treating the disease. Naturopathic health care providers help increase your body's own ability to repair itself.
- **Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)** is based on the idea that illness is caused by a disturbance in the flow of *qi* (vital energy) and an imbalance in your forces of yin and yang. TCM uses herbal medicines and mind-body practices to reach a balance again. Some mind-body practices include acupuncture, tai chi and *qi gong*.

Licensing, accreditation and regulatory laws for CAM practices are becoming more commonplace. But they do differ from state to state. Ask about a practitioner's education, training and any licensing or certification. It is important to tell your health care providers about any CAM therapies you use. This will help assure coordinated and safe care.

For more information

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health: nccih.nih.gov.

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