

## Talking to your health professionals about complementary medicine

An increasing number of Australians are using or considering use of some form of complementary medicine (CM). Like any decision concerning your health, decisions about using CM are important.

The National Institute of Complementary Medicine (NICM) has developed a number of Fact Sheets to assist you in your decision making about CM. They provide basic information about CM, answers to frequently asked questions, issues to consider, and sources for further information.

Take charge of your health by being a proactive and informed consumer. You are the most important member of your health 'team' which also includes all the healthcare professionals you rely on to manage your health and wellbeing. Giving your healthcare professionals a complete picture of everything you do to manage your health makes them your partners and helps you stay in control of your own health.

Ideally, the healthcare professionals in your team should be able to advise you about the risks and benefits of your current health regime. They should also be able to provide information about the safety, use and effectiveness associated with your current or planned use of CM. It is important to realise that some CM therapies can have an adverse effect on existing medical conditions and on the effectiveness of some medical procedures and medicines. Talking to your healthcare professionals will help ensure that your healthcare is coordinated, safe and effective.

### What is complementary medicine?

There is no internationally agreed definition of complementary medicine as it means different things in different cultures. In Australia, CM is a term generally used to encompass a diverse range of therapies and health products that aim to prevent, treat or manage illness. The term CM is often used interchangeably with traditional, holistic, natural or alternative medicine, and other variations.

Some CM therapies offer a complete system of diagnosis and treatment such as Chinese, Ayurvedic and Unani medicine. These particular CM disciplines describe health, illness and the

healing process in their own unique way which is significantly different from conventional medicine in the terms used, approaches taken and their underlying philosophy. Other CM approaches combine Western medical understanding and diagnostic techniques together with their own unique approaches e.g. chiropractic, naturopathy and Western herbal medicine. Overall, most CM therapies complement conventional medical practices instead of being substitutes or alternatives e.g. meditation, yoga and massage therapy.

Therapies and products included under the umbrella of CM can vary from country to country and may develop with time, depending on whether a particular practice or product is adopted as part of mainstream healthcare practice. For example, in many Asian countries traditional Chinese medicine is part of mainstream healthcare and is regarded as conventional whereas in Australia, Chinese medicine is considered as CM.

CM may be practiced by conventional healthcare practitioners such as medical doctors, registered nurses, and physiotherapists as well as by practitioners with relevant CM qualifications. Some CM treatments can be used as part of a person's self care such as the use of over-the-counter CM products.

### Making the most of talking to your healthcare professionals about complementary medicine

It is always a good idea to discuss any health options you are considering, including CM options, with healthcare professionals such as your doctor, pharmacist, community health nurse or CM practitioner.

Be proactive; don't wait to be asked about your CM use or intended use. Be prepared for your consultation:

- Take a list of everything you use to manage your health
- Keep a current list of your therapies and treatments, including over-the-counter and prescription medicines, as well as any vitamins and complementary medicine products such as herbal and dietary supplements. (The *National Prescribing Service*, an independent, not-for-profit and evidence based

organisation funded by the Australian Government to support the quality use of medicines, has a diary that you can use to record your medicines (available from [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)).

- Inform them if you are arranging therapy for a child or other family member.
- Be sure to tell your healthcare providers about your health history, including injuries, surgeries, major illnesses, and therapies and treatments you have had or are having an operation. Incorporate this information into any patient history forms you fill out.
- Let them know if you are pregnant, intending to become pregnant or are breastfeeding.
- Gather information on the complementary medicine therapy you're interested in. You may want to take copies of the information you have obtained with you so you can refer to them and your healthcare provider can help you evaluate the information

- Write down all the things you want to talk about. See *Choosing Complementary Medicine* Fact Sheet for questions and issues you might want to know about when choosing CM.

Finally, to ensure you make the most of the consultation, keep a record of the information you receive and ask questions if something is unclear. You might consider asking a family member or friend to accompany you so you can compare notes after your visit.

Your healthcare providers may not be able to answer every question, but they can help you find the answers or direct you to relevant and appropriate sources for advice and further information.

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