

Complementary and Integrative Medicine: What Parents Need to Know

Where do you turn for help when your child gets sick? You may call your child's doctor or another health care professional. You might call a parent or friend for advice. You may look on the Internet or in a book.

While most children in North America receive conventional medicine when they are sick, many parents also want to know about natural therapies. Alternative medicine, complementary medicine, folk medicine, holistic medicine, and integrative medicine are some terms used to describe these different therapies. Read on for more information from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) about complementary and integrative medicine.

Terms to Know

Conventional medicine, also known as Western or mainstream medicine, describes treatments or therapies used by a medical doctor (MD), doctor of osteopathy (DO), nurse practitioner (NP), or physician assistant (PA). Other conventional health care professionals include physical therapists, psychologists, dietitians, and registered nurses. Conventional therapies include, for example, antibiotics for an infection or an inhaler for asthma.

Alternative medicine describes a treatment or therapy used in place of conventional medicine. For example, butterbur can be used in place of medications to prevent migraine headaches.

Complementary medicine describes a treatment or therapy used along with conventional medicine. For example, acupuncture can be used along with medicine to treat pain.

Folk medicine describes a treatment or therapy that is passed down through generations within a culture. Most folk medicines are considered to be complementary or alternative medicine. For example, chicken soup can be used to treat a cold or the flu.

Approaches to Patient Care

Holistic medicine describes an approach to patient care that focuses on the body, mind, and spirit of the patient as well as social and environmental aspects of health.

Integrative medicine describes an approach to patient care that uses both conventional and complementary therapies that are safe and effective. Integrative clinicians promote health, focus on prevention, and encourage patients and their families to be part of the healing process.

Common Questions

Q: Are all "natural" therapies safe?

A: No. Therapies are not safe just because they are natural. Side effects from natural therapies are rare but can occur. Check with your child's doctor before adding or changing any therapy.

Q: Does the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulate natural products?

A: Yes. The FDA regulates natural products such as dietary supplements. However, they are regulated as a food. They are not regulated like medicines. While most people can avoid buying rotten tomatoes or bruised fruit, it's much harder to avoid poor-quality supplements. The FDA does not guarantee the purity, potency, effectiveness, or safety of natural products sold as dietary supplements.

Q: Do natural therapies really work?

A: More research is needed for all kinds of therapies for children, including natural therapies. Some natural therapies may benefit children with certain conditions but may not benefit children with other conditions. This is also true for conventional therapies.

Q: Do you need a special license to practice complementary medicine?

A: Each state has different licensing rules. Check with the licensing board for your state to find out if a health care professional has a license to practice. If your state does not require a license to practice (for example, some states do not license acupuncturists), you should check to see if the health care professional is certified by a national professional organization. Always ask about a health care professional's training and experience. Find out if the health care professional has been specifically trained to treat children and how many children he or she treats each week.

Q: Will insurance pay for it?

A: Insurance companies and flexible health care spending accounts have many different plans that cover different therapies. There is often less coverage for complementary therapies than for conventional care. Check with your insurance company.

Q: Why is it important to talk with my child's doctor about these treatments?

A: Talking with your child's doctor helps you know if a treatment is safe and effective. Talk about all products you are giving to your child, including vitamins, herbs, and other supplements. This is especially important because there can be dangerous side effects when some medicines or therapies are given with other medicines and therapies at the same time. Bring all the products you give your child to each medical appointment. Always let your doctor know if another health care professional is caring for your child so that care can be coordinated.

Ask all your child's health care professionals to talk with each other. Open communication is the best way to promote the safest care possible.

Q: Are there pediatricians who practice integrative medicine?

A: Yes. More and more pediatricians are offering complementary therapies and advice as part of their medical practice. Although pediatricians recommend conventional therapies such as vaccines to protect children from illness, many pediatricians also recommend and refer patients for complementary therapies such as herbs, dietary supplements, special diets, and exercise. There are pediatricians who have completed integrative medicine training. Many have completed a fellowship in integrative medicine, and many have completed certification through the American Board of Integrative Holistic Medicine or the American Board of Integrative Medicine. There are lists available of board-certified physicians. Also, a pediatrician's Web site may provide information about professional training or fellowship completion.

Q: Does the AAP have members who work with complementary and integrative medicine?

A: Yes! The AAP has a Section on Integrative Medicine, which includes more than 425 pediatricians across the United States and Canada. You can find out more about this section at <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/Sections/Section-on-Integrative-Medicine/Pages/SOIM.aspx>.

Resources

Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine and Health

www.imconsortium.org

MedlinePlus from the National Institutes of Health, US National Library of Medicine

<https://medlineplus.gov>

This site includes information on dietary supplements as well as medications and common medical conditions.

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health from the US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health

<https://nccih.nih.gov>

Physicians Board Certified by the American Board of Integrative Medicine

www.aihm.org/search/custom.asp?id=4620

Remember

Talk with your child's doctor about all treatments your child is receiving. This includes prescribed medications, home remedies, over-the-counter remedies, and dietary supplements such as vitamins or herbs. Also, tell your child's doctor if your child is seeing any other complementary or mainstream health care professionals. Your child's health and well-being depend on open communication, trust, and respect among all health care professionals.

From Your Doctor

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



healthychildren.org

Powered by pediatricians. Trusted by parents.
from the American Academy of Pediatrics

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is an organization of 67,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of all infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

Any websites, brand names, products, or manufacturers are mentioned for informational and identification purposes only and do not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of external resources. Information was current at the time of publication. The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

© 2019 American Academy of Pediatrics. All rights reserved.