
Alternative and Complementary Therapies for Cancer

In the treatment of cancer, there are proven and unproven treatments. Treatments outside of the medical treatment team’s established norm of recommendations are called alternative therapies (treatments in place of). Complementary therapy (treatments added to) may enhance the therapy recommended by your physician, while other therapies may interfere with treatment. Always discuss any form of treatment with your physician.

After a diagnosis of cancer, you will hear from many sources—friends, family and the media—about treatments for cancer. Some of the information sounds very appealing, especially when faced with choosing between treatments that have unpleasant side effects and those that do not. It is true that chemotherapy and radiation therapy have some unpleasant side effects; however, these treatments have proven results. They have been found effective in fighting your type of cancer. The types of treatment recommended by your physicians have many years of scientific study and clinical trials supporting their effectiveness. Many of the alternative therapies have no studies proving their effectiveness. Some healthcare organizations, including hospitals, cancer clinics, and physicians, however, are engaged in clinical trials to test the effectiveness of some alternative therapies. Choosing to forgo conventional therapy and replace it with an alternative treatment calls for a critical, thorough and wise investigation.

Investigate the Merit of an Alternative Therapy by Asking:

- What and how much scientific evidence from clinical studies on humans has been published that explains the effectiveness of this type of treatment?
- Are testimonials about effectiveness available from reputable health professionals or are there only anecdotal (unscientific) reports?
- Are the claims promoted validated with clinical data such as X-rays or laboratory tests?
- Is the person promoting the therapy personally benefiting?
- Do the promoters claim that if the products fail, it is because of “lack of faith” on the part of the user?
- What does the treatment cost? Is it covered by insurance?

Some complementary therapies are encouraged by physicians. Complementary therapies and activities may enhance your recovery. These may include meditation, relaxation, stress management, acupuncture, exercise such as yoga, and some diets and vitamin supplements which do not compromise your nutrition. Discuss with your physician the complementary therapies that will not interfere with your treatment and may be beneficial to you. Many healthcare organizations, including hospitals and cancer centers, have integrated these types of therapies in the treatment protocol in an attempt to provide a more holistic and balanced approach to treatment.