

# Alternative Medicine



The number of Americans using alternative medicine for themselves and their children is increasing. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, 40 percent of Americans in 1997 used alternative medicine, spending \$27 billion out of pocket. Six out of 10 did not tell their physicians they were doing so.

Alternative medicine is also known as complementary, holistic, unorthodox and integrative medicine, and refers to most treatment

practices not considered conventional—that is, widely practiced or accepted by the mainstream medical community. People often refer to these remedies as “alternative” if used alone and as “complementary” if used in combination with other alternative or conventional therapies.



The widely known methods of alternative remedies are acupuncture, homeopathy, herbal medicine, chiropractic, massage therapy, naturopathy, relaxation therapy, aromatherapy, music therapy, megavitamins and traditional folk medicine. The most common is herbal medicine.

Although information on the use of alternative medicine by children is limited, a majority of pediatricians believe that some of their patients seek alternative care. Alternative medicine is an aspect of children’s health care that can no longer be ignored.

Some medical schools now teach alternative medicine due to its rising and widespread use. A growing number of hospitals and some health maintenance organizations offer alternative medicine treatment, and

laws in some states require health plans to cover this alternative form of care.

Alternative methods of healing may be popular, but their scientific basis has not been established in most cases. The areas where alternative medicines seem to have most appeal are those where conventional medicine is not able to meet a need. Examples are chronic back pain, gastrointestinal problems, arthritis and eating disorders—health problems either caused or made worse by stress or emotional disorders.

The decision to use complementary and alternative remedies is an important one. As an informed health consumer, you need to consider the safety and effectiveness of the treatment, the expertise and qualifications of the health care practitioner, the quality of the service delivery, and the particular medical problem before selecting an alternative method of treatment.

## Things to consider

- Because Congress determined in 1994 that “dietary supplements” were exempt from the regulations of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the safety and effectiveness of herbal and alternative remedies are not monitored.
- Understanding the safety, effectiveness, indications for use and proper dosage of alternative remedies is important to avoid possible interaction or harmful delays in getting conventional treatment.
- Most untested herbal remedies are probably harmless and seem to be used primarily by healthy people for prevention or health maintenance. However, adulterants (inferior and improper ingredients) in some herbal products can cause poisoning. The herbal stimulant ephedra (also known as Ma Huang, epitonin or ephedrine and marketed as safe and legal) is known to have caused deaths.
- The *Medications Administration Policy* for your child care facility will also apply to alternative medicine. The administration of medicines should be limited to:
  - Prescribed medications ordered by a licensed health care provider for a specific child; and
  - Nonprescription medications recommended by a health care provider for a specific child, with written permission of the parent or legal guardian, and instructions to the facility from a health care provider.



California Childcare Health Program  
UCSF School of Nursing  
cchp.ucsf.edu  
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