



August 2012 Health Note

How Much Do You Know about Complementary and Alternative Medicine?

In 2007, more than 1 in 3 adults nationally used some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to address health and wellness concerns.ⁱ CAM refers to a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional (Western) medicine.ⁱⁱ The National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) defines complementary medicine as the use of CAM together *with* conventional treatments, and defines alternative medicine as the use of CAM *in place* of conventional medicine.ⁱⁱ

CAM includes products and practices such as herbal supplements, meditation, chiropractic care, and acupuncture.ⁱⁱ The most commonly used therapies are deep breathing, meditation, chiropractic, osteopathic and massage therapies, and natural products such as fish oil/omega 3, glucosamine, echinacea, flaxseed oil, and ginseng.ⁱ

Characteristics of Adults More Likely to Use CAM

Nationally, CAM usage is highest among adults ages 30-69, with greater use among women than men (42.8% vs 33.5%) and those with higher levels of education and income.ⁱ A joint AARP and National Institute's of Health National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) study found over half of adults age 50 and older have used CAM at some point in their lives.ⁱⁱⁱ Among races and ethnicities, rates vary; American Indian or Alaska Natives report the highest usage (50%), followed by Whites (43%); Asians (39.9%); Blacks (26%) and Latinos (24%).ⁱ

Why People Use CAM

CAM is most frequently used for management of back, neck, and joint pain, arthritis and other musculoskeletal concerns, as well as anxiety, high cholesterol, severe headache or migraine, and insomnia. Adults over the age of 50 tend to use CAM therapies to improve general health and wellness, and to reduce pain or treat painful conditions.ⁱ

Precautions

There is no standardized, national system for credentialing CAM practitioners and CAM credentialing varies greatly from state to state and from one profession to another.^{iv}

There are also issues concerning the safety of natural products, the most frequently used type of CAM.ⁱ

- Consumers often believe "natural" products, categorized as dietary supplements, are safer than pharmaceutical drugs.^{iv}
- Manufacturers are not required to prove the safety and effectiveness of a dietary supplement before it is put on the market.^v
- Some dietary supplements may interact with medications or other supplements, or may have side effects of their own.ⁱⁱ
- Some supplements have been found to contain hidden prescription drugs or other compounds.^v

Because there is a paucity of rigorous, well-designed clinical trials that assess the safety and effectiveness of many CAM therapies, research sponsored by NIH's NCCAM is being conducted to build a scientific evidence base about CAM therapies' safety, effectiveness and application for specific conditions.ⁱⁱ

Providers Need to be Informed about CAM Usage

Less than half (42%) of adults who used CAM in the previous 12 months disclosed their usage of CAM to a physician (M.D.) or osteopathic physician (D.O.)ⁱ

In order to minimize risks, it is important to talk to providers about CAM use to ensure coordinated, quality care and to minimize risk of interactions with conventional medicine.^v

Resources

- **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine:** nccam.nih.gov
- **Health Topics A- Z.** Summaries for both patients and providers of the scientific evidence available for CAM therapy use for specific health topics. <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/atoz.htm>.
- **NCCAM's Time to Talk Campaign.** Provides information, educational materials and a toolkit for patients, providers and organizations. <http://nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk>
- **NCCAM Clinical Digest:** nccam.nih.gov/health/providers/digest
- **Online Continuing Education Series.** Video lectures available for CME/CEU credits: nccam.nih.gov/training/videlectures
- **Herbs at a Glance.** Fact sheets that provide basic information about specific herbs/botanicals: <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/herbsataglance.htm>
- **Consumer Reports:** 10 surprising dangers of vitamins and supplements <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2012/09/10-surprising-dangers-of-vitamins-and-supplements/index.htm>

ⁱ Barnes PM, Bloom B, Nahin R. *CDC National Health Statistics Report #12*. Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use Among Adults and Children: United States, 2007. December 10, 2008.

ⁱⁱ National Institutes of Health, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. *CAM Basics: What Is Complementary and Alternative Medicine?* Publication D347. Updated July 2011. Available at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatiscam/D347.pdf>. Accessed on June 21, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ AARP/NCCAM. Complementary and Alternative Medicine: What People Aged 50 and Older Discuss With Their Health Care Providers. Consumer Survey Report; April 13, 2010.

^{iv} Long, A. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Complementary and Alternative Medicine: What Physicians Should Know. *Rx for Prevention: Promoting health through prevention in Los Angeles County*. 2011;2(9).

^v National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Safe Use of Complementary Health Products and Practices. Updated June 4, 2012. Available at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/safety>. Accessed on July 18, 2012.