

## What Is Alternative Medicine?

Alternative medicine refers to health treatments and practices that are outside the approach of mainstream Western medicine and seek to replace it. (1) For example, using essential oils or homeopathic remedies to treat illnesses or medical symptoms instead of over-the-counter medicines would fall under the umbrella of alternative medicine.

Alternative therapies is a broad category that can include everything from massage therapy and Ayurvedic remedies to herbal tinctures and Reiki treatments. (2) Alternative medicine isn't as regulated as mainstream Western medicine, and alternative medicine practitioners can range from those who've gone through years of official study and accreditation to those who are self-taught with no official credentials.

Alternative medicine may be used interchangeably with other terms, such as complementary medicine, naturopathy, homeopathy, and functional medicine, but each of these is slightly different in focus and meaning. It's important for those interested in alternative and complementary medicine to ask questions about what treatment modalities are used and what the end goal is.

## What Is Complementary Medicine?

Complementary medicine is a category that includes many of the same nontraditional approaches to medical care as alternative medicine, but the intent is slightly different. Instead of seeking to replace Western health care practices, complementary medicine is used in conjunction with mainstream medical care for a holistic approach to health care and wellness. (1) Functional medicine doctors are practitioners of complementary medicine because they use tools like special dietary plans, touch therapies, meditation, yoga, and Ayurvedic approaches alongside Western medicine. Some of these treatments, such as chiropractic care and massage, are fairly mainstream.

Practitioners of complementary medicine often work in mainstream medical environments, such as hospitals and clinics, and many have traditional medical degrees and training but have chosen to include these other treatment modalities in their practices. (3)

Complementary medicine can be especially helpful when it comes to mental health. Mainstream mental health treatments often include medication, but there's also a focus on stress reduction, cognitive behavioral therapy, and learning coping skills. Complementary medicine practitioners may use alternative therapies like meditation and aromatherapy to help get clients' symptoms under control so they're better able to cope with life's stressors.

## Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a practice that started as part of traditional Chinese medicine more than 2,500 years ago. (4) During an acupuncture treatment, practitioners place special needles in the patient's skin at specific locations. Traditionally, people used acupuncture because they believed the needles relieved blockages in a person's Qi, or life force. (5) Acupuncture has been gaining more

mainstream medical acceptance and is in practice in 103 out of 129 countries surveyed by the World Health Organization. (4)

In the United States, practitioners use acupuncture most often to treat back, neck, and joint pain. But health care providers may also use it to treat other common conditions, such as migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, allergies, infertility, and mental health conditions, such as depression. (4)

While it's not entirely understood how acupuncture works, the effective rates have been strong enough for it to gain traction as a more mainstream therapy. Researchers believe acupuncture may affect the nervous system in specific ways that allow it to help relieve pain. Others believe the results may be due to the placebo effect. (4)

## **Meditation**

Meditation is another alternative therapy that mainstream medicine now widely accepts as beneficial for a variety of health conditions. Meditation comes from traditional Eastern medicine and focuses on cultivating an awareness of the breath to calm the mind and, consequently, the body. (6) Studies have shown that meditation can be helpful for patients who experience chronic pain and those dealing with stress-exacerbated illnesses and conditions. (6)

Meditation can be very helpful because it requires no special equipment and people can do it anytime, anywhere. People can practice meditation standing, seated, or laying down, but sitting is one of the common postures because it allows for a comfortable, relaxed position but still requires maintaining awareness to avoid falling asleep. During meditation, the person focuses on their breath, including the sound, quality, speed, and depth. In some meditation practices, the person may tighten and release muscles of their body — known as progressive relaxation — or perform a body scan to check for areas of tension.

For those struggling with their mental health, such as with depression or anxiety, meditation can help the person become aware of intrusive thoughts or impending anxiety attacks and give them the opportunity to calm their nervous system. (6) Some licensed therapists use meditation techniques regularly with clients in traditional mindfulness therapy sessions because it's thought to be so effective.

## **Aromatherapy**

Aromatherapy has been around for thousands of years and is still practiced widely in many countries. The practice of aromatherapy is built around the premise that natural plants have properties people can use to help ease symptoms of some illnesses and diseases. Aromatherapy uses essential oils, which are very concentrated extracts from plants, resins, and other natural substances. Essential oils can come from a plant's roots, leaves, stem, or flowers. In the practice of aromatherapy, the person puts the oils in a diffuser or sniffs them to inhale the scent and experience the benefits. Massage therapists may also use aromatherapy in their practices by diluting essential oils in massage oil to provide extra benefits to the client.

Research has shown that aromatherapy can have a positive effect for those experiencing acute pain after surgery or painful treatments and those who have chronic pain. Aromatherapy can also benefit those who are working on mental health issues, as the sense of smell is especially powerful when it comes to mental associations and the nervous system. Lavender can help people experience more restful sleep or fall asleep faster, and aromatherapy with citrus oils may help improve overall mood. (7)

Essential oils are readily available for anyone who wishes to practice aromatherapy, but all oils aren't equal when it comes to quality. Those interested should look for quality oils from well-known companies that have information on the oils' purity and come in dark glass bottles. (7)

## **Acupressure**

Acupressure is similar to acupuncture, but instead of using needles, practitioners apply pressure to certain points on the body. Acupressure can be helpful because it can be done by anyone — people can even practice acupressure on themselves — and doesn't require any equipment. Acupressure also comes from Chinese medicine and is traditionally thought to open channels in the body so Qi can flow freely. Traditional Chinese medicine often points to blocks or stagnancy in the life force as the reason behind common ailments such as pain, depression, and anxiety.

Acupressure practitioners apply firm, direct pressure to acupoints on the body. Acupoints are specific areas of the body that people believe correspond to specific ailments or other parts of the body. The practitioner maintains this pressure for up to 30 seconds. In some cases, they'll repeat this a few times until there's a relief. (8)

Studies have shown that acupressure is effective in treating everything from nausea and insomnia to motion sickness and chronic headaches. (8) Acupressure can also help alleviate feelings of stress and anxiety, and because there's little to no risk of side effects, it's a treatment many people prefer to turn to first before using medications or mainstream treatments. (9)

Sources:

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