

# Complementary and alternative cancer therapies

For people with cancer, their  
family and friends



### **Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies**

Cancer Council Victoria 2008. Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies: For people with cancer, their family and friends. Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria.

This edition February 2009

This booklet is available online – visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank Annie Angle for researching and writing this booklet, and Cancer Research UK for permission to adapt parts of the booklet from [www.cancerhelp.org.uk](http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk)

This booklet was developed with funding from the State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services.

Many Cancer Council services would not be possible without the generous support of many Victorians.

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# Introduction

This booklet is for people with cancer and their carers and families who would like to know more about **complementary therapies and alternative therapies for cancer**. These are sometimes referred to as ‘unproven cancer therapies’ or complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

For most people, a cancer **diagnosis** comes as a huge shock. It can bring uncertainty and confusion about which treatment might be best for you. Your specialist cancer doctors will recommend treatment that has been proven to cure or control your type of cancer. Most people accept these recommendations and feel confident to begin treatment as soon as possible.

You may also hear about other treatment approaches known as **complementary therapies**. Research shows about one-third of people with cancer use some sort of complementary therapy at some time during their illness. When used alongside your **conventional cancer treatment**, some of these therapies can make you feel better and improve quality of life. Others may not be so helpful and in some cases may be harmful.

A small percentage of people (1% to 2%) use **alternative therapies**. While the Cancer Council supports the right of individuals to seek information about complementary and alternative therapies, and respects their decision to use them, we also want their decision to be an informed one. There are significant differences between a complementary and an alternative cancer therapy. Understanding these differences will help you make the right choices about using these therapies. Refer to the section titled ‘Understanding the terms’.

You will probably receive lots of advice and information about different types of therapies, from your family, friends, medical professionals, health therapists, workmates, the Internet and various media sources. Some advice will be reliable and helpful; some may be confusing, false and misleading. This booklet aims to help you and

those close to you sort through this advice, ask useful questions and make the choices that are best for you. We hope to help you recognise which therapies may be helpful, and recognise false claims about false ‘cures’.

You may also like to read our fact sheet *Making Informed Decisions about Potentially Harmful and Unethical Cancer Therapies*.

If you would like to talk to someone about your cancer and its treatment and receive further information, call the Cancer Council Helpline. You can speak to a qualified, experienced cancer nurse who is specially trained to listen and provide information and support. Refer also to the section on ‘Help and support’ at the end of this booklet.

You can telephone the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20, Monday to Friday 8.30 am to 8 pm.

The words in **bold** are explained in the glossary.

**\* Are you reading this for someone who does not understand English? Tell them about the Multilingual Cancer Information Line. See the inside back cover for details.**

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# Understanding the terms



Several terms are used to describe ‘cancer therapies’ or ‘cancer treatments’. It can be quite confusing. Over the next few pages we define these terms.

## Conventional cancer treatments

These are also called ‘evidence-based’, ‘mainstream’, ‘medical’, ‘traditional’, ‘orthodox’, ‘proven or ‘standard’ cancer treatment. They include:

- surgery
- chemotherapy
- biological therapies (e.g. cancer vaccines, monoclonal antibodies or interferon)
- radiotherapy
- hormone therapy.

Conventional cancer treatments have been tested in **clinical trials** (see the section titled ‘About clinical trials’) and/or evaluated after many years’ experience with patients. They have been proven to work: their benefits and side effects are generally well known. This does not



mean that all conventional treatment can cure all cancers or that they all work equally well. But they are known to save lives and help many people live longer and more comfortably.

## A word about ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ medicine systems

Conventional medicine may also be called **western medicine**. This differs from eastern medicine, which is not considered conventional. **Eastern medicine** is a broad term used for traditional types of Indian, Tibetan and east Asian medicine, which share philosophies about the body’s energy system and the need to maintain balance and harmony. The understandings and beliefs that support eastern therapies are different from those of western medicine.

## Complementary therapies

These are therapies that are used alongside **conventional cancer treatment**. You may hear them called ‘supportive care’. Examples of commonly used **complementary therapies** include massage, support groups, music therapy and meditation. These are detailed later in this booklet.

While these therapies have not been scientifically proven to treat or cure cancer, a few have been shown to help some people feel and cope better with their cancer and its treatment. These are positive benefits but it does not mean that the therapies are having a physical effect on your cancer (e.g. shrinking a tumour).

Most cancer doctors support the use of complementary therapies used alongside your conventional cancer treatment. However, there are a few therapies that are known to interact and cause side effects when used alongside conventional treatments. We recommend that you discuss *any therapy* you may be using or are thinking about using with your cancer doctor. You may also find it helpful to read the section titled ‘Are all therapies safe to use?’

The Cancer Council supports the use of complementary therapies that have been proven to be safe and effective in scientific studies.

## Alternative therapies

These are therapies that are used instead of **conventional cancer treatments**. For example, someone may make a decision to stop having **chemotherapy** and try to treat their cancer with a special diet or **herbal medicine** that has not been scientifically proven to treat cancer.

As well as being unproven and unlikely to treat your cancer, alternative therapies may be harmful to your health. See the sections titled 'Unethical practices (cancer quackery)' and 'Commonly used alternative therapies'.

Your cancer doctor is likely to suggest you avoid using alternative therapies, especially if you give up conventional cancer treatment. They will still encourage you to discuss any therapies that interest you. However, they may have concerns about the safety of certain therapies. Keeping your doctor informed will help them provide the best care for you. See the section titled 'Talking to your medical team'.

**Table: The American Cancer Society classifies complementary and alternative therapies in five main groups**

1. 'Mind-body therapies'	These use methods that are said to improve the ability of the mind to have a positive physical effect on your body. Examples include prayer, hypnosis, yoga, t'ai chi, meditation, and art or music therapy.
2. 'Herbs, vitamins and minerals'	These include vitamins and herbs, and food substances such as those used in homeopathy.
3. 'Manual healing and physical touch'	These are based on manipulation and movement of body parts as well as using 'energy fields'; they include massage, chiropractics, acupuncture, reiki, light therapy and osteopathy.
4. 'Diet and nutrition'	These include diets that involve 'detoxification', 'cleansing' with enemas, fasting, juicing and other practices. (Some of these are thought of as alternative therapies.)
5. 'Pharmacological and biological treatment'	Many of these are thought of as alternative therapies rather than complementary therapies: examples include shark cartilage, oxygen therapy, laetrile and radio wave cancer treatment, and questionable cancer clinics in Mexico.

A word about whole body systems (holistic medicine): These are a form of health therapy that aims at treating the whole person – body, mind, spirit and emotions – not just the part or parts of the body in which symptoms occur. They tend not to include prescription drugs or surgery and include homeopathy, naturopathy, ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine.

## Other terms

Other terms you may come across to describe these therapies include:

- 'Unproven remedies' – meaning they haven't been tested in properly designed scientific studies and proven to work.
- 'Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)' – this description is commonly used among health professionals and is becoming more widely used in patient literature. It includes both terms but recognises the difference between them.

- ‘Integrated health care’ or **integrative medicine** – the combining of conventional and complementary therapies with proven benefits. There is some high-quality evidence of the safety and effectiveness of the therapies used in integrative medicine.
- ‘Unconventional’ or ‘unorthodox’ cancer treatments – treatments that are not used by a cancer specialist to treat cancer.
- ‘Cancer quackery’ – treatment and advice that appears to be ‘medical’, and is based on speculation that may appear plausible, but has no backup from scientific findings.

You may also hear the terms ‘questionable’ or ‘unscrupulous cancer treatment’. This simply means a therapy that is thought to be worthless, dishonest or false.

## Scientific evidence

All **conventional cancer treatments** must be scientifically proven to work in **clinical trials** before they can be considered standard treatment for a certain type of cancer.

This means that they go through a series of rigorous tests in the laboratory and on hundreds or thousands of people in clinics before we know if they are the safest and most effective type of treatment for a certain cancer. Results are published in peer-reviewed and well-regarded medical journals and presented at medical conferences, where they may be challenged – and further tests called for – by experienced medical specialists. This is what we mean by scientific evidence.

Scientifically proven treatments are known to help destroy or remove, control or shrink a cancer. They help make people feel better (although having a treatment like chemotherapy can be unpleasant at the time). They may cure the cancer, or minimise its effects.

See the section titled ‘About clinical trials’.

# Why do people with cancer use therapies?



**In the past decade the use of complementary and alternative therapies has increased considerably in Australia and other countries.** Australian studies have found between 22 and 52 out of every 100 people with cancer use one or more **complementary therapies**. In the US, figures have been as high as 91 out of every 100 people.

The large differences in figures are mainly due to the fact that most studies do not distinguish between complementary therapies and alternative therapies – so a very common practice like taking a multivitamin might pad out the statistics. Figures also vary depending on whether or not ‘prayer’ and ‘support groups’ are included in the statistics.

Even without any scientific evidence to prove that these therapies help, many people with cancer still turn to them. Scientific evidence is not all that matters for someone facing a serious illness such as cancer.

Feeling in control of your situation and believing a therapy will help you to feel better are valid reasons for deciding to use a complementary cancer therapy.

The most commonly used therapies are **complementary therapies**, which include:

- support groups
- chiropractic techniques
- relaxation techniques such as meditation and deep breathing
- massage
- exercise.

Generally, it is safe to use one of these complementary therapies along with **conventional cancer treatment**. Later, we discuss **alternative therapies**, which can be extremely unsafe.

Some people use prayer to help them cope with cancer. Cancer Council does not consider prayer to be a complementary therapy.

People choose to use complementary and alternative cancer therapies for different reasons.

## To improve sense of wellbeing

Many people with cancer say using certain therapies makes them feel better and more able to cope with their situation. Something like a massage might significantly improve a person's mood. How you feel can play a very important part in how well you cope with your cancer and its treatment. But just because a therapy makes you feel good doesn't mean it has had any effect on actually treating your cancer.

*'After my chemotherapy treatment, I often feel so sick, tired and down in the dumps for a few days. But after a massage I feel relaxed, alive and better able to cope – it's amazing.'*

*– Lyn, age 55*

Many **complementary therapies** focus on relaxation and improving your ability to cope with stress and anxiety. The idea that certain complementary therapies can have an effect on your emotions has become an area of interest for health professionals. Several studies are

underway in the US looking at how positive emotions may benefit your health.

## A health professional has recommended a therapy

Many health professionals working in the cancer area are aware that certain **complementary therapies** may provide the support and care you need to relax and cope with your cancer and its treatment. They may suggest support groups, counselling, **acupuncture**, **meditation**, yoga or massage.

## They believe conventional treatment won't help

Some people believe conventional cancer treatment won't help. They think the available treatments and their side effects are too severe. They are not convinced about the value of having a treatment that can often make you feel worse for a short while.

While many conventional cancer treatments can have quite harsh side effects, they have been thoroughly tested in **clinical trials** to prove they will help control, treat or cure your cancer. The side effects are usually short-lived and stop once treatment is over.

With conventional cancer treatments, it may be weeks or months before you see or feel their benefits.

## To feel more in control

People who go through **conventional cancer treatment** often say they feel out of control of their situation. It can sometimes feel like everyone else is making decisions about your treatment and care. You may feel very vulnerable, frightened and not sure how to control what is happening to you. Many people say choosing which therapy they use

and when gives them a sense of taking more control of their treatment and care.

‘For me, exploring complementary therapies was about participating in my treatment. When you are faced with a cancer diagnosis you are very quickly plunged into a world that is very foreign and out of your control. I wanted to explore what I could do that would help give me, and the treatment I was going to be having, the best possible chance. Being involved in my treatment helped me to regain a sense of control.’ – Megan, age 45

## They like the idea of treating the ‘whole person’

Many **complementary therapies** and **alternative therapies** are said to ‘be treating the whole person’. You may hear this called ‘holistic medicine’.

Holistic medicine understandably appeals to many people because it includes taking care of your emotional and spiritual needs. However, care for the whole person must include effective treatment to get rid of the cancer itself. Although research is ongoing, at present there is no scientifically proven cure for cancer outside **conventional cancer treatments**.

Medical people working in cancer centres are also concerned about the ‘whole person’. Their aim is to cure or control the cancer and give you the best quality of life. Unfortunately, some doctors don’t have the time they would like to spend with their patients. But most cancer units or centres offer a wide range of support services (see the section titled ‘Help and support’).

In some countries, cancer centres employ complementary therapists who offer their services to people with cancer and their carers (sometimes for free). Although not common in Australia yet, many



health professionals will be able to provide you with information about how to access certain therapies you may have an interest in.

## To control side effects

Certain **complementary therapies** have been shown to help control side effects of cancer and its treatment. For example, **acupuncture** may help control sickness caused by **chemotherapy**. There is also evidence it can help pain, especially after surgery. Research has also shown that music therapy used alongside anti-sickness drugs may be of benefit to some patients having high-dose chemotherapy, to help control nausea and vomiting. While these treatments may help control certain side effects, there is no scientific proof to show they can control or cure your cancer.

You can read more about individual therapies elsewhere in this booklet: please refer to the index for the treatment you are interested in.

## They feel comforted by their therapist

Many people who see complementary therapists say they enjoy the time their therapist takes to care for and talk to them. The ‘touch, talk and time’ you may receive from a therapist can help to improve your emotional quality of life. Unfortunately, many cancer doctors don’t have the time they would like to spend talking and finding out about their patients’ emotional needs.

## They believe a therapy is ‘natural and healing’

Many people are attracted to the idea that a therapy is natural, non-toxic and healing. Or, the therapy or therapist aims to treat your ‘whole person’ and not just the cancer (holistic health care).

Many **complementary therapies** are ‘natural’ but this doesn’t always mean non-toxic or safe. Some therapies can be harmful. For example, some herb extracts may be poisonous or interact badly with other drugs. See the section titled ‘Are all therapies safe to use?’

## Using the therapy helps to maintain a feeling of hope

Staying positive and hopeful is important for many people with cancer and their families and carers. Like most things in life, if you feel hopeful you are likely to cope better. People with **advanced cancer** often find ways to be hopeful: for treatment to slow the growth of the cancer, for good days with family and friends. A balance between hope and realism is important.

## They want to ‘boost their immune system’

You may see certain therapies promoted as being able to ‘boost your immune system’. For people having cancer treatment it may be appealing to use something to ‘boost your immune system’ and help fight the cancer. We need the evidence before we can know if this approach is possible and effective in treating a cancer. **Clinical trials** are looking into this.

## They believe it will cure their cancer

Often the people most likely to use other types of therapies are those suffering painful and debilitating symptoms or people trying to come to terms with an incurable cancer. Understandably, people can feel desperate when they learn **conventional cancer treatment** can no longer help cure their cancer. Although there should always be help to control your symptoms and possibly your cancer, for some people this often isn’t comforting enough. In this situation it is only natural to

look for other treatments that may help you feel better or offer hope of a cure.

Some people believe or can be led to believe certain **alternative therapies** will help control or cure their cancer. Only a small percentage of people (about 1% to 2 %) with cancer forgo conventional cancer treatment to follow this belief. However, it is still important to be aware **there is no scientific evidence to prove any complementary or alternative cancer treatment can control or cure any type of cancer.**

## Making an informed decision

Feeling hopeful and staying in control of your situation is extremely important if you or someone close to you is living with cancer. We definitely don't aim or want to destroy these hopes or feelings. However, while there are grounds for some of the reasons listed above, others are not scientifically proven. It is important to find out as much as you can about a therapy before using it. Weigh up its possible advantages and disadvantages. Be sure to base your decision on what is best for you. Pinning all hope on an **alternative therapy** may lead to unnecessary expense and unhappiness, especially when there are **conventional cancer treatments** that may be able to control or cure your cancer.

*'I see complementary therapies as just that – “complementary”. Working with other treatments toward better outcomes. It was important for me to be involved in my treatment and to do everything I could.' – Jim, age 63*

# Are all therapies safe to use?



**Certain therapies have been studied and shown to be either helpful or ineffective.** Some are proven to be harmful. Other therapies may cause side effects. There are hundreds of therapies for which there is no scientific evidence to back up their use either way. The safety of particular therapies is discussed in the section titled ‘Types of therapies.’

## Safety of complementary therapies

Many **complementary therapies** are safe to use alongside your **conventional cancer treatment**. Your doctor may even recommend certain complementary therapies, for example, massage to help relieve stress.

Certain factors can determine how safe a therapy may be:

- Your cancer type – for example, chiropractic techniques would not be suitable for people with bone cancer.
- The stage of your cancer – for example, certain massage techniques would not be suitable for someone in advanced stages of cancer who is in a lot of pain.

- Other treatments you are having – several therapies interfere with certain conventional cancer treatments and change how well they work. See the section titled ‘Types of therapies’.

It is important you speak with your doctor before using any type of therapy so that you can discuss your needs and decide together the safest therapies for your situation.

## Safety of alternative therapies

People with cancer may think they have nothing to lose by using an alternative therapy. However, a few **alternative therapies** have serious drawbacks. Some can be harmful and affect your overall health and wellbeing. Even some vitamins and antioxidants have been shown to have serious side effects. (See the section titled ‘Vitamins and other dietary supplements’ in ‘Commonly used alternative therapies’.)

As well as affecting your health, they may cost you a lot of money or you may need to travel a long way to have them. For people who are feeling sick, travelling can be very uncomfortable. People or organisations who promote specific therapies or products may convince you to give up your **conventional cancer treatment** and try something alternative and more ‘natural’ to cure your cancer. Just because something is labelled ‘natural’ doesn’t mean it is safe.

## Why doesn’t ‘natural’ always mean ‘safe’?

Hundreds of health products (herbs, vitamins, tonics, creams, homeopathic medicines and other products) can be bought over the counter in health food stores and health clinics and on the Internet. Many are labelled or marketed as ‘natural’ and ‘healing’. This does not always mean they are safe to use.

Nearly half of all **conventional cancer treatments** come from plants or other natural substances. Although many of these are proven

to treat cancer, they can still have severe side effects. For example, the **chemotherapy** drugs vincristine (Oncovin), vinblastine (Velban) and vinorelbine (Navelbine) were originally developed from a tiny blue wild flower called the periwinkle. Two other commonly used chemotherapy agents, paclitaxel (Taxol) and docetaxel (Taxotere) came from the yew tree. These chemotherapy drugs can cause temporary side effects such as hair loss, sickness and bowel problems.

Many ‘natural’ herbal, vitamin and other supplements can have side effects, some of them serious. They can even interact with other drugs you are taking. For example, some herbs can make your skin more sensitive to sunlight, so you should not take them during **radiotherapy** treatment. Taking very high doses of vitamin C during chemotherapy can be dangerous and make you very ill. This may be the case with other vitamin preparations as well.

We have scientific evidence to show that many chemotherapy drugs can help treat cancer. The benefits outweigh the risks of their side effects. We do not have this information about most **complementary therapies** and **alternative therapies**.

## Things to consider

- Be careful and look into all available information about any therapy you want to try.
- Talk to your cancer doctor before you begin any type of therapy.

# Accessing complementary therapies



**There are several places where you may be able to access complementary therapies.** Most hospitals will offer counselling and support groups to their cancer patients. Call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 to find out how to access these services.

Other **complementary therapies** are not routinely available in most cancer care hospitals in Australia. Certain therapies such as massage, **reflexology** and relaxation techniques may be on offer in some cancer units but it is more likely in the hospice or palliative care setting. Other types of therapies that research suggests may benefit people are yoga, t'ai chi, music and art therapy. Hopefully, in time, a wide range of complementary therapies will be offered in the hospice, palliative care and hospital settings.

Therapists who work in a hospital setting must have the necessary qualifications. They will be familiar with working with people with cancer. They may be volunteers or paid by the hospital to offer their services.

Other places where you may be able to access or find out about a variety of complementary therapies in your area include:

- your GP
- Cancer Support Groups or centres (call 13 11 20 for more information)
- complementary therapists in private practices (see the section titled 'Finding a therapist').



# Talking to your medical team



It's very important to tell your doctor if you are taking any non-medical therapies, since they could affect your conventional cancer treatment.

It's a good idea to talk to members of your medical team about **complementary therapies** and **alternative therapies** if you are thinking of taking them.

## What do health professionals know about therapies?

With hundreds of different types of therapies available, it is difficult to know about them all. Most health professionals will be willing to find out how to access reliable and up-to-date information for you.

Health professionals are receiving more education in this growing area of interest. Cancer Council Victoria runs workshops to help health professionals communicate better about these therapies and encourage patients to ask questions and talk about what they might be using. Good communication will be the most effective protection against the use of harmful therapies.

## Talking to your doctor

Most health professionals working with people with cancer are positive about them using **complementary therapies**. They are generally only concerned with the use of unsafe therapies, or if someone decides to give up **conventional cancer treatment** for an unproven **alternative therapy**. They want to be sure that a therapy won't cause serious side effects or interfere with a conventional treatment. Your cancer doctor wants what is best for you. Despite this, many people don't talk to their medical team about alternative therapies.

You may feel your doctor is too busy to discuss these treatments. Even if your doctor does not ask, it is still important to tell them. They will want to know so they can plan your care in the best way possible. It ensures your conventional cancer treatment will continue to work as well as possible. Having an open and honest discussion with your cancer doctor will help you decide which therapies are going to be safe for you to use.

If you are having trouble discussing any unconventional therapies in an open and supportive manner with your medical team, you may want to consider getting a second opinion. But if you and your doctor can work together and willingly talk about these types of therapies, it will help you get the best care and treatment for your cancer.

# Choosing to give up conventional treatment



**You always have the right to refuse treatment.** Even if you decide to stop **conventional cancer treatment** to use a therapy your medical team disagrees with, they should still respect your right to make this decision. It is important your decision is acknowledged. However, they may want to let you know what risks are involved. They may also have concerns that the therapy you have chosen will cost you a lot of money and offer false hope.

## Keeping an open mind

If you go ahead with an **alternative therapy**, your specialist cancer doctor may ask you to think about stopping the therapy if it has not helped to control or cure your cancer within a certain timeframe. If your cancer remains unchanged or worsens in this time, they are likely to suggest you consider **conventional cancer treatment** again. It can be worth keeping an open mind in these situations.

The most important factor is that you and your medical team communicate. If your doctor is aware of your thoughts they can plan

the best way to support you. That way you can make your decisions based on accurate and up-to-date information.

You may find it helpful to read the section titled ‘Unethical practices (cancer quackery)’.

Keep in mind that there is a big difference between a therapy making you feel better and it actually treating your cancer.

## What if my family or friends want me to try an alternative therapy?

Your family or friends may read about an **alternative therapy** and encourage or pressure you to use it. This can be difficult, especially because you know they care and are well meaning. But you have to be sure it is what you want to do.

Find out all you can about the therapy they are suggesting before making any decision. Know about your **conventional cancer treatments** and their proven benefits. If possible, take the person suggesting the therapy along to your next doctor’s appointment. You can then discuss the issues together.

You may also find it helpful to talk things over with someone outside the family – your nurses, a social worker or a friend – or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 and speak with an experienced cancer nurse. The important thing is you feel you have enough support and reliable information to make your decisions.

## Why do alternative therapies work for some people?

You may read or hear about people who claim their cancer was cured by an alternative treatment. It is only natural to want to believe these positive stories. Sadly, individual stories about miracle cures are not enough evidence that a treatment works.

Often there is no way of knowing how true a story is. What many stories often fail to mention is these people have also had **conventional cancer treatment**, such as **chemotherapy** or **radiotherapy**, either before or alongside the therapy. Conventional treatments can sometimes take weeks or months to work.

But even if you feel better taking an alternative therapy, an improvement in your mood should not be confused with curing your cancer. Any treatment – proven or unproven – may make you feel better in the short term. This is called the ‘placebo effect’ – feeling better simply because something has been done that you expected to help. Many studies suggest placebos can relieve a wide variety of symptoms. However, the treatment has done nothing for the underlying problem.

Most cancers show no symptoms during much of their course, so many people with cancer who use an unproven therapy can be misled into believing they have been cured, even though the cancer is still progressing. You may end up unwell again only a short time after you thought you were cured. This is why doctors wait at least two years before telling someone that their cancer is cured.

Doctors can’t always predict the course of a cancer. Some cancers grow and spread much faster than expected. In other cases, a person may live many months or years longer than the doctor predicted. Very occasionally a cancer will simply go away, quite unexpectedly. Doctors call this ‘spontaneous remission’. We don’t know why this happens, but these people have almost always had some conventional cancer treatment. Some may have also used a complementary or alternative cancer therapy, but others have not.

Most people who promote alternative cancer ‘cures’ don’t usually publicise their failures – those people for whom the therapy does not work, who die or never return to the therapist.

The only way of knowing whether a treatment works is by doing clinical trials. See the section titled ‘About clinical trials’.

## Are health professionals hiding the ‘real cure’ for cancer?

Some people claim that health professionals (doctors and scientists) and/or certain companies (drug companies) are hiding the ‘real cure’ for cancer. They believe these people are making too much money from providing their services or drugs to sick patients to ever admit that herbal remedies, meditation or a special diet, for example, could help treat or cure cancer. There have also been claims that ‘off-patent’ drugs that might help with treating cancer are not being investigated properly because there is no money in it for the drug companies.

This doesn’t make any sense. First, there are over 200 types of cancer and the way they act and respond to conventional treatment varies considerably. The causes are different for different types of cancers. It is very unlikely that any single treatment would ever work to treat all types of cancer.

The fact that a drug is ‘off-patent’ is not a barrier to its development as a treatment for any type of disease, including cancer. An extensive amount of research is being done into a broad range of drugs that may help treat or cure cancer. This research needs to be done before we can prove any treatment is safe and effective. With many **alternative therapies** there is no evidence to prove that it controls or cures cancer – it is just ‘thought’ that it might. Imagine the outrage if scientists started to use cancer treatments they ‘thought’ might help but which had not been through a series of **clinical trials** to prove it.

Remember – doctors, scientists and those working for drug companies also have families and friends who can get cancer. And doctors get cancer at the same rate as everyone else. If they knew the cure they would want to let people know. The reason why most health professionals are wary of certain **complementary therapies** and **alternative therapies** is because they have concerns about their safety.

# Things to consider before using a therapy



Many people find the best way to decide on whether to use complementary therapies or alternative therapies is to understand as much as possible about their cancer and its treatment. This helps them to feel more in control and to make the choices that are best for them.

Before deciding on any type of therapy, find out about its safety and effectiveness as well as some background information on the therapist (see the section titled 'Finding a therapist'). Find out about its cost before agreeing to anything.

## Making the right decision

The following tips can help guide you to make the right decision about using any type of therapy:

- Ask yourself what you want to gain: do you want help with treating the cancer, control of symptoms and side effects or do you just want to learn how to relax? No complementary or alternative cancer therapy can control or cure cancer of any kind. However,

some may help make you feel better and relieve certain symptoms and side effects.

- Look for scientific evidence that the therapy will be safe and beneficial – not just anecdotal evidence. (See the section titled ‘Finding reliable information about therapies’.)
- Look at how the service provider describes the therapy. Descriptions such as ‘miracle or magical cure’, ‘fast and effective’, ‘new cancer cure’ may sound hopeful and convincing but they are likely to lack scientific backup.
- Be wary of any company or therapist who describes their product as a ‘secret’ remedy, ingredient or formula. By law the contents of proven treatments are public knowledge. People are entitled to know what they are being given.
- Find out about possible side effects and if it will affect other treatment you may be having.
- Find out how much the therapy is going to cost and how many sessions are being recommended. If there is long-distance travel involved, find out whether the cost covers flights and accommodation. (See ‘Calculating the cost’.)
- Find a reliable therapist. (See ‘Finding a therapist’.)
- Talk your treatment choices over with your doctor and others you feel can help. (See ‘Talking to your medical team.’)
- Take your time making your decision. Don’t let anyone (family, friends or a therapist) pressure you into something you are not completely sure about.

Use the ‘Help and support’ section at the end if you want to find out more about any therapy.

**Chiropractics** and osteopathy are the only two **complementary therapies** regulated by law in all states of Australia. In Victoria, non-medically qualified **acupuncture** practitioners must be registered by the Chinese Medicine Registration Board of Victoria.



## Finding a therapist

Most reputable therapists will be a member of a professional body (such as a college or association) and follow a strict code of conduct. However, a few therapists will not be so careful or caring, and there may not be a professional body for all types of therapies.

Some therapists are out to make money rather than really help you. You need to feel confident about your therapist. The following tips may help you choose a therapist who best suits your needs.

- When you find a therapist you think you may want to use, have a list of questions to ask, such as how long they have practised, if they have treated cancer patients before and what they expect you to gain from the therapy.
- Always check the qualifications of the therapist. This is not always easy. Sometimes you can contact the relevant professional body and ask if the therapist is registered. (See 'Help and support' for more information). Otherwise, contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 for advice.
- Question the organisation about the level of training their therapists complete.
- Where there is a professional body, ask if they have a code of practice and ethics, as well as disciplinary and complaints procedures (most good complementary organisations do). Ensure the therapist you find follows these codes and procedures (if not, don't use them, since you may want to lodge a complaint).
- Ask the organisation where to look for further information about the specific therapy.
- If the therapist uses the title 'Doctor' or Professor, where does the title come from? Is it a recognised institution?
- If the person calls themselves a 'specialist', what does this mean? Do they refer to medical qualifications recognised in Australia? ('Doctor' does not always mean a medical doctor.)
- If you have mobility problems you may want to check if there is a lift or suitable access into the building.

- Get a recommendation if possible. Ask your local health centre, cancer doctors and nurses and GP if they know of any reputable local complementary therapists.

Once you find a therapist who you think you would like to use, ask the following questions before you make an appointment.

- How long have you been in practice?
- Do you have insurance in case of accidents or negligence?
- Have you treated cancer patients before? If so, how many have you seen in the past 12 months and with what types of cancer?
- Is there any evidence to support the use of your therapy in people with cancer?
- What should I expect to gain from the therapy?
- How much will the therapy cost and how many sessions or quantities of the product are being recommended? If there is long distance travel involved find out whether the cost covers flights and accommodation.
- Are there any side effects from the treatment and if so what should I do if I have them?
- Where can I find further information about the therapy and its benefits?
- Are there any concessions or Medicare rebates on the therapy?
- If I want to stop a therapy session at any time, is this okay? (See ‘What to do if you have concerns about your therapist’.)
- Is it okay for my specialist cancer doctor to contact you if necessary?

Keep a record of what your therapist proposes to do. It’s a good idea to keep a record of what therapies you have and other issues your therapist discusses. These records may be useful in discussions with your medical doctor, or if anything goes wrong.

'I think that it is important to look for a therapist who is accredited by a recognised organisation. I spoke with my medical team about any therapy I was thinking about using and who I was considering using. It is also really important to have a good relationship with your therapist. They need to understand that they are part of a treatment team who are caring for you and know what it is that you hope to get from the therapy they are offering.' – Amanda, age 56

## Stopping a therapy or changing therapists

Some people begin using a certain therapy and then decide it isn't quite what they thought. You may decide you want change the therapist you use or stop having treatments all together. There are many reasons for this including:

- feeling no benefits
- uncomfortable or painful treatments
- having unexpected side effects
- feeling uncomfortable with your therapist
- expensive treatments
- the therapy doesn't suit your needs
- feeling too unwell to travel to the therapist.

All of these are valid reasons for stopping a therapy or changing who you use.

It is your choice when you stop using a therapy or when you change therapists.

You also have the right to ask your therapist to stop treatment at any stage during a therapy session. You may just need to change position, go to the toilet, get a drink or talk to your therapist about what you are feeling. But no one should force you to continue with a therapy you are

not happy about. Just let the therapist know you want to stop. If you want to give them a reason you can, but you may not feel like talking about it and that is fine.

## What to do if you have concerns about your therapist

There are several problems you may come up against when using alternative therapies or complementary therapies. You may feel that a therapist has:

- not provided you with suitable care
- not given you sufficient information
- been negligent or unprofessional
- failed to give you respect, dignity or privacy.

If you feel you have not been treated in the way you think you deserve, contact the Health Services Commissioner (see ‘Help and support’). They are trained to assist you if you want to make a complaint about any health service provider. Don’t let embarrassment prevent you from making a complaint if that is what you want to do. If the therapist has behaved unethically then you will also be helping to prevent further, possibly more serious, problems for others who may see them in the future.

Making a complaint about a therapist who doesn’t belong to a professional body can be more difficult. This is why it is important to make sure that the person you see is registered with their appropriate professional body before you begin treatment.

## Calculating the cost

The use of complementary and alternative therapies is big business. It is estimated that \$2.3 billion was spent on these types of therapies in Australia in 2000. This is nearly four times the amount people spend

on all pharmaceuticals! Think about what you are paying for and what you are actually getting in return.

## The cost of complementary therapies

Some **complementary therapies** are expensive. This cost comes at a time when you may already be under financial pressure because of your cancer and its treatment. It is important to find out what the costs will be.

Private complementary therapists can charge anywhere between \$50 and \$150 for an hour of massage, **reflexology**, counselling or hypnotherapy. Treatments are usually more expensive in the city centre. There may be a reduction if you book a few in advance so always ask. And you may be able to access certain therapies free or at a reduced cost, so always ask your medical team what is available. For example, your GP may be able to refer you for counselling sessions at a reduced cost.

Herbal medicines, vitamins and other supplements used alongside your conventional treatment can cost a lot of money. It may appear cheap to buy one bottle of supplements but if you need four or five a month it can become expensive.

Sales from these products are big business in most countries, worth billions of dollars a year. Beware of buying over the Internet or through a catalogue and paying a lot more for a product than it is worth. There is no quality control of products bought online. Always check with your doctor to see if the product is safe to use.

You cannot claim complementary therapies under Medicare but many therapies are covered by private health funds. Contact your private health fund to find out which ones they may cover.

## The cost of alternative therapies

The cost of **alternative therapies** varies a lot. Many are very expensive. Some may set you back a few dollars a week but others can cost hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars for a treatment that is

unlikely to work. Some may involve travel and accommodation costs as well.

There may be ongoing costs so it is important to think about all these things before you go ahead. There have been situations where individuals and families have gone into a lot of debt just to finance an alternative therapy they believed would cure the cancer. See the next section for tips on how to prevent spending unnecessary money on alternative therapies.

# Unethical practices (cancer quackery)



Sadly, a few individuals, groups, organisations or companies deceitfully promote alternative therapies by stating that it can help to treat or cure cancer. You may read or hear about such a therapy by word of mouth, in the media or through a website.

However, the therapy may actually:

- be harmful/dangerous
- have no effect on your cancer
- cost you a lot of money
- have side effects, some of which may be serious
- have no scientific evidence to back up the effectiveness of the treatment
- be promoted by people who don't have any recognised qualifications or be pretending to have certain medical skills and knowledge
- be promoted by people who do have recognised medical qualifications but they are not using them in the correct way or they may no longer be registered.

Only a small percentage of people with cancer (1% to 2 %) decide to stop their standard treatment and try an alternative treatment. They face a number of risks.

Some alternative therapists may persuade you to use an alternative therapy that has the potential to cause you problems or harm you. Some may actually believe in what they are doing. Others deliberately target vulnerable people with cancer and convince them to pay a high price for a treatment that they know is ineffective and possibly harmful.

Most people seeking these treatments are in the advanced stages of their cancer. They may be very weak, underweight, in pain or have other symptoms. Understandably, they are desperate to find a cure and willing to try anything they think will help.

Some unethical practitioners may also suggest you have caused your cancer yourself – perhaps because of previous behaviours or beliefs.

**There is no evidence your attitude or the way you think causes cancer or prevents a treatment from working.**

Unethical therapists sometimes suggest that the cancer did not shrink or disappear because the patient did not follow their advice strictly enough.

You could be asked to pay up front large sums of money for an alternative therapy. There have been reports of sums between \$10,000 and \$35,000 for a ‘package of care’.

Some people who promote alternative cancer therapies are misleading and deceiving the public regarding the nature, benefits and suitability of their products and services. They may be using corrupt and false methods and promises when convincing you to pay for treatment.



## How will I know if claims of cure are false?

When you are under a lot of stress and desperate to find a cure for your cancer it can be difficult to know who to believe. It can be hard to recognise potential problems. It is not lack of intelligence that leads people to these treatments offering a false hope of cure, but a natural desire to want to try anything that may help them.

Those who promote alternative therapies can be very convincing. They may tell stories of people close to them who have been cured. They may appear very caring and understanding. People in the advanced stages of cancer may say, 'What have I got to lose?' Unfortunately, there have been many reports of people who have become much sicker, lost a lot of weight, spent all their life savings, mortgaged their homes, or even died from using an alternative therapy.

A dishonest and unethical therapist may:

- Try to convince you your cancer has been caused by a poor diet or stress: they will claim they can treat or cure your cancer with a special diet.
- Promise a cure for your cancer – or to detoxify, purify or revitalise your body. There will be quick, dramatic and wonderful results – a miracle cure.
- Use untrustworthy claims to back up their results rather than scientific-based evidence from **clinical trials**. They may even list references to scientific data and studies. But if you look deeper, their references may be false, nonexistent, irrelevant, based on poorly designed research and out of date.
- Warn you that the medical professions are trying to hide the 'real cure for cancer' and not to trust your doctor.

- Display credentials not recognised by reputable scientists and health professionals.
- Charge you a lot of money and ask for it upfront before you begin any treatment.

**\* For more information, read our fact sheet *Making Informed Decisions about Potentially Harmful and Unethical Cancer Therapies*. You may also find it helpful to read the next section and the section titled 'Commonly used alternative therapies'. Call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 to talk with a cancer nurse.**

# Finding reliable information about therapies



**People with cancer and their families often seek information about their disease, conventional cancer treatment and complementary and alternative therapies.**

## Searching the Internet

The Internet is a key and easy source of information. However, with thousands of sites providing information about alternative therapies it can sometimes be hard to know which information is reliable and up to date. Anyone can put up information on the Internet. Sick people and their families are often vulnerable and believe information that offers hope of improvement or cure. So it is important that you make sure that what you are reading is safe and correct.

If you are a confident web user you may be able to spot 'quackery', false promises and dishonest advertisers. If you are having trouble, look at the following questions. If you answer yes to any of them, research suggests this usually means the site is making some false

claims and there is unlikely to be any scientifically based evidence to back them up.

- Is the site promoting a cure for cancer?
- Does the site say that there are no or very few side effects?
- Does the therapy cost a lot of money and can you buy it online?
- Are there a lot of patient ‘testimonials’ on the site?

It is also important to ask your health care team’s opinion – if they don’t know they should be able to find out. Or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20. You could also check the websites of the Therapeutic Goods Administration or the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) (see ‘Useful websites’).

## Other sources of information

You may also find information in newspapers, television, books, from therapists, health centres and health food stores. Book stores have hundreds of titles around complementary and alternative therapies, including those for cancer. Like the Internet, some will be reliable but others won’t be.

If you are unsure about something you hear about or read, call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 and speak with a cancer nurse. We have an extensive list of research relating to complementary and alternative therapies. You can also ask your medical team.

# Research into therapies



**Like all other treatments for cancer, it is important to research complementary and alternative cancer therapies.**

People need to know about their possible side effects, effectiveness and how they may improve quality of life for the person with cancer. Without science-based research, we cannot know how safe or effective any type of treatment is.

There is no scientific reason why many of these therapies cannot be tested. Anecdotal evidence is not enough to prove a treatment works. It may be coincidental, or due to **conventional cancer treatments** that they also had. (See ‘Why do alternative therapies work for some people?’)

For ethical and safety reasons, all drugs and techniques used in conventional cancer treatment must be tested in **clinical trials**. If researchers decide to study a medicine, vitamin, herb or other substance, this is first done in the laboratory. If anything shows signs of being able to help treat, prevent or cure cancer, it is then tested in people in clinical trials. Some therapies, such as massage, **chiropractics** and **acupuncture**, can't be tested in a laboratory, but these therapies still ought to be tested in properly conducted clinical trials to see that they are safe and will actually benefit people.

Cancer Council Australia ‘recommends that the National Health and Medical Research Council funds scientific studies to examine the safety and effectiveness of promising and commonly used complementary and alternative cancer medicines, so that people with cancer and health care providers can differentiate between those that are not beneficial or are dangerous and those that are helpful’.

## About clinical trials

There are four phases of clinical trials.

**Phase 1** trials only involve a few people (maybe five to 20). They may involve people with many different types of cancer. At this stage patients are given a very small dose of the substance being tested. As people tolerate it the amount is slowly increased and side effects are very closely monitored. The aim of this type of study is to find a safe dose as well as possible side effects.

**Phase 2** trials test how well the treatment works with a specific type of cancer. They also involve small numbers of patients. The aim at this level is to see whether the treatment has a benefit for people with cancer.

**Phase 3** trials start once the treatment has been shown to be safe and effective. They then compare the new treatment with a standard treatment to see if it works as well or better. This usually involves hundreds or thousands of people from one country or around the world. Phase 3 trials are usually randomised. This means that people are chosen by chance to go in a certain group. Neither the patient nor their doctor knows which treatment the patient is having (this is called ‘blind’ study). This is the best way to avoid bias results from a trial.

Trials may not be just about whether or not the treatment will shrink the cancer but also whether or not the treatment makes people feel better. ‘Quality of life’ studies are often done alongside phase 3 trials.

They look at how the treatment or illness affects people and all parts of their lives – work, home life, emotions, relationships and health.

**Phase 4** trials are carried out after a drug has been licensed. They collect further information about side effects, safety and the long-term risks and benefits of a drug.

Researchers can also look at the results from several or many similar trials together to give them a better idea about a treatment. This is called a ‘systematic review’ or a ‘meta analysis’.

## Research trends into therapies

Results from well-designed trials would give us answers about the effectiveness and safety of certain **complementary therapies** and **alternative therapies**. It is often difficult to get funding in this area:

- Trial designs for this type of research are often difficult to do.
- Many complementary therapists don't have experience in designing clinical trials.
- It can be difficult to find the time and resources for cancer specialists and complementary therapists to work together on a research study.

However, there have been some promising developments. The European Research Initiative on Complementary and Alternative Medicine (EURICAM) has been set up. This aims to encourage European governments to spend more on researching complementary and alternative therapies.

In the US and UK research in this area has been increasing for the past few years. In the US research has focused on the use of herbs, vitamins and other dietary supplements. In the UK the ‘hands on’ or ‘touch’ therapies’ such as massage and reflexology have been the area of interest, along with mind-body therapies (visualisation, hypnosis and yoga). There has also been a significant amount of research into how acupuncture can help people with cancer.

In Australia there are moves to try to improve the situation. For example:

- In 2007 the National Health Medical Research Council (NHMRC) made a special call for researchers to apply for funding to increase knowledge in the area of complementary and alternative medicine.
- A project by the National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre and Cancer Council Victoria is aiming to help health professionals effectively discuss complementary and alternative medicine with cancer patients, their families and friends.
- The Society of Integrative Oncology was established in 2003. This is a non-profit organisation for health professionals who are studying and using complementary therapies for people with cancer. It is encouraging awareness and opportunities for international research and holds yearly conferences to discuss trial results and ideas for new areas of research.

## Finding out about clinical trials research

Your cancer specialist can advise you about trials that may already have been done as well as let you know if there are any trials currently in progress. It's good to ask – your interest will help health professionals become more aware that people do want more research into the use of complementary and alternative cancer therapies.

See 'Useful websites' for more about research and clinical trials.



# Types of therapies



**There are hundreds of complementary therapies and alternative cancer therapies.** Refer to the table in ‘Understanding the terms’ to see how the American Cancer Society groups them.

In the next few pages we give a brief overview of some of the most commonly used **complementary therapies**, and **alternative therapies** that you may hear about or read about on the Internet.

## Commonly used complementary therapies

Cancer Council Australia supports the use of complementary therapies that have been scientifically tested and proven to be safe and effective. Some therapies must be avoided in some situations. We recommend that you talk to your cancer specialist before starting any therapy.

### Massage therapy

Massage therapy involves a variety of techniques that use touch and tissue manipulation to enhance the function of those tissues and promote relaxation and wellbeing. There are many different forms, including relaxation massage, Swedish massage, **aromatherapy** massage, sports massage, remedial massage, **shiatsu** and **reflexology**.

## Safety and effectiveness

Research has shown that certain types of massage, in the short term, do help people feel emotionally better. It is thought that these therapies may also help with physical symptoms. But we need much larger trials with follow-up after the trials to find out how effective massage really is for people with cancer.

Certain massage techniques would not be suitable for someone in an advanced stage of cancer who is in a lot of pain. Please talk with your cancer specialist before starting massage, if this is your situation.

## Meditation

There are many different types of meditation, some of which are part of ancient Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Meditation has become very popular in western cultures as well. It is thought that regular meditation can help to calm your mind and enhance your health and wellbeing. People with cancer use meditation to help ease anxiety, stress, pain and sleeping problems. Types of meditation include:

- visualisation (see below)
- transcendental meditation – repeating a specific word or phrase (mantra) to help focus the mind and improve concentration
- prayerful meditation – this aims to enhance your spirituality and will vary between religions
- guided meditation – using a CD or DVD, a teacher directs your mind in a certain way to help you relax
- meditation with movement – this means combining a form of movement such as t'ai chi, yoga or walking with a meditation practice.

## Safety and effectiveness

Research has shown that meditation can sometimes help to make people feel good, improve concentration and control pain. There is also some evidence that it may enhance the immune system.

Overall, meditation practices are safe to use. Sometimes, for people with depression, severe anxiety or certain other psychological problems, meditation can worsen symptoms. If this happens, don't persevere with the meditation – but you could discuss the problems with an experienced meditator who has experience working with cancer patients. While most doctors would not stop you using meditation as part of your cancer care it is always best to discuss it with them before practising.

There is no scientific evidence that meditation can help to prevent, control or cure cancer or any other disease.

## Visualisation

This is also called 'guided imagery' or 'creative visualisation'. Visualisation is one of the most common types of **complementary therapies** used by people with cancer. It involves using your mind to direct and control images to help you relax. In other words, you use your imagination to help control your symptoms and side effects.

### Safety and effectiveness

There have been some positive results from trials using visualisation, prompting further research in this area. A few studies have shown that it may help people with cancer to manage stress, anxiety and depression. One study has shown that visualisation greatly enhanced the mood of women having treatment for breast cancer.

There is no scientific evidence that visualisation can help with physical symptoms such as sickness and vomiting, but it may be useful for emotional wellbeing.

There is no scientific evidence that visualisation can help to control, cure or prevent any type of cancer.

## Acupuncture

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese medical system that involves inserting fine needles just under the skin into specific pressure points on the body. It is used to treat various conditions such as pain, nausea

and stress. In traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture is often used with diet, herbal medicine and different massage techniques. It is said to help to restore the body's energy, known as Qi (pronounced chee) to its natural state. In western cultures, acupuncture is usually used on its own to treat various conditions, including pain and helping people with addictions such as smoking.

### Safety and effectiveness

One of the main reasons people with cancer use acupuncture is to help with pain and nausea. There has been a lot of research into the use of acupuncture, including phase 3 **clinical trials**. Most of the research has been looking at how it can help with sickness (nausea and vomiting) and pain. There are also some studies looking at how it can help to reduce menopausal symptoms brought on by treatment with **chemotherapy**. There is some evidence to suggest that acupuncture can help with these symptoms in certain situations, especially with chemotherapy-related sickness.

There is no scientific evidence that acupuncture can help to control or cure cancer.

### Chiropractics

This aims to diagnose, prevent and treat mechanical disorders of the bones, muscles and joints. Chiropractors use their hands to manipulate your bones and muscles, particularly those of your spine. No surgery or drugs are used.

In Australia chiropractics is one of only two **complementary therapies** regulated by law. The other is osteopathy.

### Safety and effectiveness

Chiropractors believe that if your spine and nervous system are healthy the rest of your body will be in good health and wellbeing. There is some evidence that it *may* help to treat lower back pain, neck pain and headaches but more research is needed before it can be said that chiropractics is effective in helping treat pain of any kind.

Chiropractics is not recommended if you have bone cancer, osteoporosis, broken bones, cancer that has spread to the bones and certain diseases of the bone marrow such as leukaemia. Whatever type of cancer you have, ask your doctor before seeing a chiropractor.

There is no scientific evidence that chiropractics can help control, prevent or cure cancer.

## Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on a belief that ‘like cures like’ – that illness can be cured by taking a minute dose of a substance that, if taken by a healthy person, would produce symptoms like those being treated.

Homeopathic remedies are water or alcohol-based solutions that contain very small amounts of certain plant, mineral and animal substances. Homeopaths believe the remedies stimulate the body to heal itself.

### Safety and effectiveness

Homeopathy appears to be safe. Some individuals say that homeopathy helped their symptoms but there is little reliable evidence to prove this. Some researchers suggest that we cannot be sure that any positive effects come from homeopathic remedies – results may simply be a **placebo effect**.

There is no scientific evidence that homeopathy can help to control or cure cancer.

## Reiki

Reiki (pronounced ‘ray-kee’) is a Japanese type of hands-on (touch) therapy. Reiki practitioners believe your ‘energy fields’ influence your physical and spiritual health. If they can ‘release’ your energy fields, it allows the body’s natural healing powers to take over and heal itself.

## Safety and effectiveness

There have been individual reports that reiki can help with relaxation and your overall sense of wellbeing. Early **clinical trials** reported that reiki might help with relieving pain in some people with **advanced cancer**. There are US trials looking into the effects of reiki on how quickly prostate cancer grows and anxiety in people with prostate cancer. But we need more research before we will know how helpful it really is.

Overall it is thought that reiki is safe to use but there are some reiki practitioners and doctors who suggest that people with psychiatric disorders should avoid using reiki. Ask your cancer specialist for advice before using any type of complementary therapy.

There is no evidence that reiki can cure, control or prevent any type of cancer.

## Commonly used alternative therapies

Cancer Council does not support the use of any alternative therapy that has not been scientifically tested and proven to be safe and effective.

None of the **alternative therapies** described below has been scientifically proven to help control, cure or prevent any type of cancer. Always speak with your doctor before trying any type of therapy. We do not recommend that you replace your **conventional cancer treatment** with any type of alternative cancer therapy.

There are hundreds of different types of alternative cancer treatments. Although we are unable to mention them all here, many of the names of therapies are listed under the heading below 'Alternative cancer clinics around the world'. If you are unsure about any therapy ask your doctor or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

### Laetrile (also known as 'vitamin B17')

This is a synthetic form of a substance called amygdalin. This is found in raw nuts and some fruit pips. The main foods associated with laetrile are apricots and almonds.

## Safety and effectiveness

In the 1950s certain people began to promote this as a ‘cure for cancer’. This is not true. Laetrile actually contains the poison cyanide, and can cause serious side effects.

There is no scientific evidence that laetrile can help control, cure or prevent any type of cancer or any other disease.

## Extreme diets

There are several types of diets promoted as cures for cancer: for example, the Gerson diet, some **macrobiotic** diets, the grape diet and diets involving coffee enemas.

## Safety and effectiveness

Such diets can make you feel extremely tired and weak, cause unwanted weight loss, reduce your ability to fight infections and generally make you ill. This can be a huge problem, especially if your body is already under stress from the cancer and its side effects.

Many extreme cancer diets cut out whole food groups, such as dairy products or meat. This means you may not get enough of the protein and calories your body needs to function properly.

If you are thinking about making any dramatic changes to your diet during your cancer and its treatment, speak with your doctor or dietitian first. They can advise you about how safe it might be.

While certain dietary factors play a part in preventing cancer, there is no scientific evidence to support any claims that any special diet can help to control or cure cancer.

There are no special foods you must use or avoid when you have cancer. The best general advice is to make sure you eat well by having a variety of foods every day, and exercise at a comfortable level.

★ **The Cancer Council’s booklet *Nutrition and Exercise* contains useful information. Visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or telephone 13 11 20.**

## Herbal remedies/medicine/herbalism

Herbal medicine uses roots, stems, leaves, flowers or seeds of plants to improve health, prevent disease and treat illness. It has grown from centuries of practice and observation from many different cultures and traditions. Herbalists are said to treat the ‘whole body’. They aim to restore your body and its ability to protect and heal itself. ‘Traditional Chinese medicine’ is an example.

### Safety and effectiveness

While many herbal remedies are probably safe to use, others may interact with other drugs or cause serious side effects. There may be impurities in the preparations that can also cause unexpected problems. The exact ingredients are not always shown or known in some herbal preparations.

Several scientific studies have found some very common ‘over the counter’ herbal remedies such as ginkgo, echinacea, ginseng, kava, garlic and **St John’s wort** may interact with cancer treatments. They can affect the way drugs are transported or broken down within the body. For example, St John’s wort, used by people to help treat depression, reacts with certain **chemotherapy** drugs. This could mean the treatments are less effective. Other herbal medicines are known to thin your blood, which can increase the risk of bleeding. This can be very harmful for people with low platelet (clotting) levels.

There are certain herbal products that researchers think may help to prevent cancer or control side effects from cancer treatments. But they are still trying to find out if this is true and which herbs are effective and safe to use alongside **conventional cancer treatments**.

There is no scientific evidence that any herbal remedy can control or cure any type of cancer.

## Vitamins and other dietary supplements

Vitamins are substances that are essential in small quantities for your health. Your body cannot make them so they need to come from your



diet. Vitamins help to maintain the normal functioning of your body and in the right quantities can help to prevent illness and disease. The essential ones are vitamins A, B, B1 (thiamine), B2 (riboflavin) B3 (niacin), B6, B12, C, D, E and K. The best way to get all the vitamins you need is through eating a healthy, well-balanced diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Vitamin supplements do not have the same benefits as those that occur naturally in fruit and vegetables. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends a diet where you enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods. **This does not include the use of vitamins and other dietary supplements.** See the website [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au) for the NHMRC dietary guidelines.

You may hear or read about ‘vitamin B17’, or laetrile or amygdalin. This is not a true vitamin. In the 1950s this was promoted as a ‘cure for cancer’. Unfortunately, this is not true. See the section titled ‘Laetrile’.

### Why do people take vitamins and other supplements?

Some people believe taking vitamins and other supplements will ‘boost their immune system’ and prevent or fight disease, including cancer. Despite there being very little research to back this up, many people with cancer (up to 60% in some countries) use some type of vitamin supplement to help improve the effectiveness of their **conventional cancer treatment**.

### Can antioxidants help to prevent or treat cancer?

There is a belief that antioxidants, which naturally occur in fruit and vegetables, may slow or even prevent the development of cancer. Examples of antioxidants are vitamin C, vitamin E, selenium and beta carotene. These substances protect the cells in your body from damage caused by free radicals (by-products of normal body processes). Over time free radicals can cause serious cell changes, causing them to grow so rapidly that they can cause tumours.

Some studies report that antioxidants may help protect against certain cancers. Others show antioxidants don't have any effect on your cancer risk. There are also results from several studies showing the antioxidant beta carotene may actually *increase* a smoker's chance of developing lung cancer. Overall there is still not enough evidence to either recommend for or against taking vitamins (including antioxidants) for cancer prevention. Several large international trials will hopefully provide specific answers about the role of antioxidants in cancer prevention and treatment. Results are not expected until after 2010.

Our message remains – eat a well-balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

There is no scientific evidence that antioxidants can help control or cure any type of cancer.

### Safety and effectiveness

Some vitamins and supplements are safe to use alongside your **conventional cancer treatment**. Others may not be, especially in high doses. They may interfere with **chemotherapy** and **radiotherapy** treatments.

The 2007 results from the US National Institutes of Health–AARP Diet and Health study, the largest of its kind, found overuse of multivitamin supplements such as selenium, zinc and beta carotene (more than seven times per week) may be associated with an increased risk of advanced and incurable prostate cancer. (For more about this study, see 'Useful websites'.)

Taking too much of any vitamin is not safe, even in people without cancer. So it is important to tell your cancer doctor about any vitamins and other supplements you are taking.

## Shark cartilage

Shark cartilage is the cartilage of hammerhead sharks and dogfish sharks that has been made into a powder. It is available in many health food stores as a dietary supplement.

Several years ago, a doctor published two books claiming that sharks don't get cancer – which is not true, sharks *can* get cancer – and that shark cartilage could cure cancer.

### Safety and effectiveness

Researchers are still interested in this substance and there have been many clinical trials looking into the effectiveness of shark cartilage in treatment of cancer. Even though very early studies in the laboratory showed promising results, it is now known that shark cartilage cannot be absorbed through the gut into the bloodstream.

There is no evidence that shark cartilage can help to control, cure or prevent any type of cancer.

## Alternative cancer clinics around the world

If you search the Internet for 'alternative cancer clinics' you are likely to come up with quite a few options. Some are in the Bahamas or Thailand but the majority are in Mexico. It is thought that there are between 35 and 50 alternative cancer clinics and hospitals in Mexico, most of which are in the border town Tijuana (US).

Some of these clinics offer a 'cure for your cancer' while others offer 'help with likely cure'. There are also similar options for clinics on offer in Australia.

It is difficult to find reliable information about exactly what these clinics do and offer people with cancer. It is thought that people who go to these clinics are asked to sign statements saying that they won't discuss their experience at the clinic with the media. However, several family members have spoken out about the problems and potential harm that some of these clinics may cause people with cancer. There have been reports of people with a supposed 'cure' actually getting

worse, their cancer progressing or even dying soon after leaving a clinic.

The clinics usually advertise their alternative cancer treatment as ‘natural’ and ‘non-toxic’. It usually involves a ‘package of care’ over several weeks. The majority cost anywhere between \$2500 and \$7000 a week, often with extra costs of travel and for a relative to stay with you. Outpatient packages can cost between \$1000 and \$2000 a week. You are often expected to pay the full amount upfront when you arrive.

You will be given an ‘individualised package of care’ which usually *sounds* very appealing: lots of relaxation, healthy food, and 24-hour care from skilled and caring people. Most packages involve the use of several treatments taken from a wide range of choices.

Below is a list of a few of the treatments you usually find on offer over the Internet at alternative cancer clinics.

**Some of these treatments can be very dangerous to use and there is no scientific evidence to support their safety or effectiveness in people with cancer.**

- Laetrile (see earlier section).
- Issels treatment – this is a system of treatments ‘aimed at strengthening your immune system’.
- Special diets such as the Gerson diet, **macrobiotic** diet, fasting and vegan. We discuss extreme diets earlier in this booklet.
- Juicing – including drinking very large quantities of carrot juice and pressed liver.
- Removal of mercury amalgam fillings.
- ‘Cleansing’ enemas or colonic lavage – which can involve the use of coffee, wheat and other substances in enemas.
- High-dose vitamins, minerals and other dietary supplements (we discuss vitamins earlier in this booklet).
- Metabolic therapy – a program developed to ‘train’ the immune system to get rid of your cancer.
- Oxygen therapies.

- Enzyme therapy – using enzymes to help with digestion and supposedly reduce the growth of the cancer.
- Cancer salves – these are pastes or poultices (a heated dressing containing a salve), which are applied to the skin and are said to treat skin cancers.
- Shark cartilage (see earlier section).
- Homeopathy (see earlier section).
- Chelation therapy – this is a known effective treatment for lead poisoning (increased level of the metal lead in the blood) but can be toxic and has the potential to damage the kidney, heart and cause death if used in the wrong way.
- Hydrotherapy – the use of water to treat disease.
- Hyperthermia (high temperature therapy).
- Giving **chemotherapy** in doses that have not been scientifically proven to help.
- Electromagnetic devices that are supposed to kill cancer cells, such as the ‘electronic zapper’.
- Insulin potentiation therapy – using insulin to induce low blood sugar levels, which can have very serious side effects.
- Microwave therapy – a type of treatment where the tissues in the body are exposed to high temperatures. Also called microwave thermotherapy.

We recommend that you speak with your doctor before using any type of alternative cancer therapy including on the above list. While some may not be harmful, many are and may actually be very dangerous to use as an alternative to or alongside your **conventional cancer treatment**.

# Help and support



**This section provides some useful ideas and sources of information.**

## Questions to ask your health care team

You may like to take all or some of these questions when you meet with the health care team.

- What are the differences between complementary and alternative cancer therapies?
- Which therapies are safe to use?
- Will the therapy help to prevent or control my symptoms or in other ways improve my health and wellbeing?
- Which therapies can I use alongside my conventional cancer treatment?
- Do the therapies have any side effects?
- Can I use over-the-counter herbs, vitamins and other supplements?
- Are the therapies or herbal medicinal products available at a competitive price?
- How do I go about finding a reliable therapist?
- How can I tell if health information I read on the Internet is true or not?

- Where do I find information about scientific research into unproven therapies?
- Who can I talk to about complementary and alternative therapies?

## Helplines and other resources

### Cancer Council Helpline

This is a confidential service where you can talk about your concerns and needs with a cancer nurse. The cancer nurse can send information and put you in touch with services in your area. Telephone 13 11 20 Monday to Friday, 8.30 am to 8 pm.

### Health Services Commissioner

Complaints and information

30th floor, 570 Bourke Street, Melbourne Vic 3000

Telephone: 8601 5200; Toll free: 1800 136 066

Fax : 8601 5219; Email: [hsc@dhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:hsc@dhs.vic.gov.au)

### The Australian Council against Health Fraud

A non-profit association that focuses on health misinformation, fraud and quackery as public health problems.

Postal address: PO Box 1166, Parramatta NSW 2124

Telephone: 0419 219 659; Fax: (02) 8221 9418

Email: [info1@acahf.org.au](mailto:info1@acahf.org.au); Web: <http://www.acahf.org.au/>

Hours: 8:30 am to 5:30 pm, Monday to Friday.

## The Australasian Integrative Medicine Association (AIMA)

The practitioner directory on the website allows you to search for practitioners in each state of Australia and New Zealand.

College House, 1 Palmerston Crescent, South Melbourne,  
Victoria 3205

Telephone: 8699 0582; Facsimile: 8699 0584

Email: [admin@aima.net.au](mailto:admin@aima.net.au);

Web: <http://www.aima.net.au/index.jsp>

Hours: Monday to Thursday 9 am to 3 pm

## Palliative care services

Palliative Care Victoria provides information about palliative care and hospice facilities and services. Telephone 9662 9644.

## Support groups

The Cancer Council Helpline can refer you to a support group in your area. Internet and telephone support groups are also available. Telephone 13 11 20.

## Multilingual Cancer Information Line

This Cancer Council service is free and confidential. You can call and speak to a specially trained nurse with the help of an interpreter. It is for people with cancer, and people who are close to them. People who speak any language can use the service. For more details see the inside back cover.

## Social and pastoral care workers

For information, support and advice, contact your hospital and ask for the social worker or patient services unit. Your local community health centre may also have a social worker on staff, or be able to refer you to a social work service. Pastoral care workers are able to discuss practical and spiritual concerns (from all religious and non-religious viewpoints).



## Useful websites

These will allow you to search for reliable information.

### **Australasian Integrative Medicine Association**

See the practitioner directory where you can search for practitioners in each state of Australia and New Zealand:

<http://www.aima.net.au/index.jsp>

### **Australian Naturopathic Network**

Although not exhaustive, it does have a list of associations for many complementary practitioners:

[http://www.ann.com.au/subindex\\_associations.htm](http://www.ann.com.au/subindex_associations.htm)

### **Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG)**

<http://www.tga.gov.au/docs/html/artg.htm>

See also the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code 2007:

<http://www.tga.gov.au/advert/tgac.htm>

### **Australian Regulatory Guidelines for Complementary Medicines (ARGCM)**

<http://www.tga.health.gov.au/docs/html/argcm.htm>

### **Clinical trials into complementary and alternative therapies**

This has general information about clinical trials: [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center is a leading cancer hospital and research centre in New York. Its integrative medicine service was founded in 1999. It carries out research into the effectiveness of complementary therapies for cancer. It has a searchable database of herbs, vitamins and plants. It lists side effects, drug interactions, clinical information and clinical trials: <http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm>

**Medline plus** is another US site that has information about complementary and alternative therapies. It is a service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. It provides detailed information about herbs and supplements, as well as latest news on various therapies:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/complementaryandalternativetherapies.html>

Sometimes trial results can be vague and conflicting. It is not always easy to work out what the results actually mean. If you are having trouble, ask your doctor or contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

## Herb, vitamins and plant remedies

The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center has a searchable database of herbs, vitamins and plants: <http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm>

Also see MedlinePlus: [http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/herb\\_All.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/herb_All.html)

National Institutes of Health–AARP Diet and Health study:

[http://www.aarp.org/health/staying\\_healthy/prevention/nihaarp\\_diet\\_and\\_health\\_study\\_multivitamin\\_use\\_and.html](http://www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/prevention/nihaarp_diet_and_health_study_multivitamin_use_and.html).

## MD Anderson Cancer Center

This website is offered to help patients and physicians decide how best to integrate such therapies into their care. There is an excellent section called ‘Reviews of therapies’, which contains evidence-based reviews of published research studies on a variety of complementary/integrative or alternative cancer therapies:

<http://www.mdanderson.org/departments/CIMER/>

## National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)

NCCAM is a US government funded institution that supports scientific research into complementary and alternative therapies. It also provides training for clinical researchers, and supports schemes to integrate proven therapies into medical training for doctors and nurses:

<http://nccam.nih.gov/>

This tells you about 10 things to know about evaluating medical resources on the web: <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/webresources/>

## CAM on PubMed

NCCAM and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) have partnered to create CAM on PubMed, a subset of NLM's PubMed providing journal citations specific to CAM: <http://nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/>

## Quackwatch

This is an American non-profit organisation that aims to 'combat health-related frauds, myths, fads, fallacies, and misconduct'. There is a lot of information about complementary and alternative therapies in cancer care: [www.quackwatch.com](http://www.quackwatch.com)

## Therapeutic Goods Administration

See the section 'Medical products and the Internet: A guide to finding reliable information': <http://www.tga.gov.au/docs/html/whointer.htm>

# Glossary: what does that word mean?

Most of the words listed here are used in this booklet; others are words you are likely to hear or read about.

**acupuncture** A type of therapy where fine needles are inserted into the skin at specific points to try to relieve pain and other symptoms.

**advanced cancer** Cancer that has spread (metastasised) and/or is unlikely to be cured.

**alternative cancer therapy** Approaches to cancer treatment, often unproven and sometimes harmful, used instead of conventional (medical) cancer treatments.

**aromatherapy** The use of essential oils that are said to have healing properties to massage the body.

**cells** The ‘building blocks’ of the body. A human is made of billions of cells, which are adapted for different functions. Cells are able to reproduce themselves exactly, unless they are abnormal or damaged, as are cancer cells

**chemotherapy** The use of special drugs to treat cancer by destroying cancer cells or slowing their growth. Chemotherapy can also harm normal cells, but they are usually able to repair themselves.

**chiropractics** Aims to diagnose, prevent and treat mechanical disorders of the bones, muscles and joints.

**clinical trials** Carefully designed research studies that investigate a new test, treatment or medical procedure in people. A trial may look at the safety, side effects and how well a treatment works in comparison to standard treatment.

**complementary therapy** Therapy used alongside medical treatment to help manage symptoms and side effects.

**conventional cancer treatment** (also known as ‘mainstream’, ‘medical’, ‘orthodox’ and ‘standard’ cancer treatment) Treatments that have been scientifically proven to treat or cure cancer.

**diagnosis** The process of finding out about a person’s illness by considering their signs and symptoms, medical background and results of diagnostic tests.

**eastern medicine** A broad term used to describe Indian, Tibetan and east Asian medicine, all of which share philosophies about the body’s energy system and the need to maintain balance and harmony.

**herbal medicine** The use of plants, or mixtures of plant extracts, to try to treat illness and promote health.

**homeopathy** A system based on the belief that ‘like cures like’.

**integrative medicine** The use of conventional and complementary therapies with proven benefits as a way of caring for someone. There is some high-quality evidence of the safety and effectiveness of the therapies used in integrative medicine.

**macrobiotic diet** A simple type of diet.

**meditation** A technique of calming the mind that aims for inner feelings of calm and peacefulness.

**placebo effect** An apparent improvement in the condition of patients who think they are being treated, but are in fact getting a ‘dummy’ treatment.

**quackery** Seemingly ‘medical’ practice and advice about your cancer and its treatment based on observation but without any backup from scientific findings.

**randomised trials** Randomising people into trial groups by chance – this is usually done with a computer – to make sure there is no bias.

**radiotherapy** The use of radiation, usually x-rays or gamma rays, to destroy cancer cells or injure them so that they cannot grow or multiply. Radiotherapy can also harm normal cells, but they are usually able to repair themselves.

**reflexology** A type of complementary therapy. The therapist massages and puts pressure on specific points on your feet, similar to acupuncture points, which is said to help ‘unblock energy’.

**reiki** A Japanese technique that is said to change and balance the energy in and around your body.

**shiatsu** Ancient Japanese massage therapy.

**St John’s wort** A herbal remedy used to help treat mild to moderate depression.

**visualisation** Using your imagination to help relieve symptoms or manage problems.

**western medicine** A system in which medical doctors and other health care professionals use evidence-based conventional treatments to treat symptoms and disease.



# Your comments

We would appreciate your feedback on the information in this booklet. Please complete and return to:

Cancer Information and Support Service  
Cancer Council Victoria  
Carlton Vic 3053  
or contact [ciss@cancervic.org.au](mailto:ciss@cancervic.org.au) or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20

Are you a cancer patient, survivor or a carer of someone with cancer?

Was the information helpful?

If yes, what was most helpful? If no, what else would you have liked to know about?

Any further comments



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# Cancer information in other languages

خط معلومات السرطان باللغة العربية

إتصلوا بالخط  
للتحدث الى ممرضة عن مرض السرطان  
باللغة العربية على لرقم **9209 0160**

Polskojęzyczna Infolinia na Temat Raka

Aby móc porozmawiać z pielęgniarką na temat raka w języku polskim należy dzwonić pod numer **9209 0165**

廣東話癌症信息專線

用廣東話與護士談論癌症  
請致電 **9209 0161**

Информационная линия по раковым заболеваниям на русском языкеЕсли вы хотите поговорить по-русски с медсестрой о раковых заболеваниях, то позвоните по номеру **9209 0166**

Ελληνική Γραμμή Πληροφοριών για τον Καρκίνο

Για να μιλήσετε σε μια νοσοκόμα σχετικά με τον καρκίνο στα Ελληνικά, τηλεφωνήστε στο **9209 0162**

Línea telefónica de Información sobre el Cáncer en el Idioma Español

Para hablar con un(una) enfermero(a) en español llame al **9209 0167**

Linea Informazioni sul cancro in italiano

Per parlare del cancro con un infermiere in italiano chiama il **9209 0163**

Đường dây Chỉ dẫn về bệnh Ung thư bằng tiếng Việt

Nói chuyện với y tá về bệnh ung thư bằng tiếng Việt, gọi số **9209 0168**

普通话癌症信息专线

若要用普通话与护士讨论癌症  
请电 **9209 0164**

For other languages please call 9209 0169. Tell us which language you speak and an interpreter will help you talk to a nurse. To speak to a nurse in English, call 13 11 20.

INTERNET: For information in a range of languages please visit our multilingual website at: [www.cancervic.org.au/other\\_languages](http://www.cancervic.org.au/other_languages)



**Cancer Council**  
**Helpline**  
13 11 20

1 Rathdowne Street  
Carlton, Victoria 3053  
Facsimile 9635 5270  
enquiries@cancervic.org.au

[www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)