

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), also referred to as *integrative* medicine, includes a broad range of healing philosophies, approaches, and therapies that conventional medicine has not commonly understood or used. A therapy is generally called *complementary* when it is used in addition to conventional treatment, and it is called *alternative* when it is used instead of conventional treatment.

Conventional therapies are those that are widely accepted and practiced by the mainstream medical community, including holders of MD (doctor of medicine) or DO (doctor of osteopathy) degrees, some of whom may also practice CAM. Other terms for conventional medicine are allopathic, Western, modern, and mainstream medicine, and biomedicine.

Traditional medicine refers to historical and indigenous systems of medicine that have been used for centuries. Therapies used in traditional medicine are sometimes called *natural*. Many CAM therapies are termed *holistic*, which generally means they consider the whole person, including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects.

As reported in 2004 by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a national survey conducted in 2002 found that 36% of Americans use some form of CAM. (When megavitamin use and prayer for health reasons are included in the definition of CAM, the percentage rises to 62%.) In a study conducted in 2003, 20% of Canadians age 12 and older reported consulting an alternative care provider in the past year. 70% of Canadians reported use of “natural health products,” including herbal products, vitamin and mineral supplements, and homeopathic medicines as well as traditional medicine.

Many women who choose CAM therapies do so because these healthcare approaches mirror their own values, beliefs, and philosophic orientations toward health and life. Some turn to CAM therapies because of their dissatisfaction with conventional medicine, but most CAM users also use conventional methods. Consumers often believe that “natural” therapies are safe. However, it is unrealistic to believe that a treatment can provide benefit without the potential for negative effects.

Despite the broad use of CAM therapies, more substantial scientific information is needed to demonstrate convincingly that CAM practices are effective and safe. In 1998, the US Congress established the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) at the NIH to stimulate, develop, and support research on CAM for the benefit of the public. The mission of NCCAM is to provide the American public with reliable information about the safety and effectiveness of CAM practices and train CAM medicine researchers; NCCAM is not a referral agency for alternative medical treatments or individual practitioners. NCCAM can be reached through its consumer

clearinghouse (toll-free at 1-888-644-6226) and through its Web site (<http://nccam.nih.gov>).

NCCAM groups CAM therapies into five major domains: (1) alternative medical systems, (2) mind-body medicine, (3) manipulative and body-based methods, (4) energy medicine, and (5) biologically based treatment. Brief descriptions of these systems follow.

In Canada, CAM products are regulated by the Natural Health Products Directorate (NHPD). The mission of the NHPD is to ensure access to natural health products that are safe, effective, and of high quality while respecting freedom of choice and philosophic and cultural diversity. Drugs and natural health products that are authorized for sale in Canada carry an eight-digit Drug Identification Number (DIN), a Natural Product Number (NPN), or a Drug Identification Number for Homeopathic Medicine (DIN-HM) on the label, indicating that the products have been assessed by Health Canada.

CAMline is an evidence-based Web site (www.camline.ca) for both healthcare professionals and the public that provides a specific Canadian focus.

The practice of CAM modalities is regulated individually by each Canadian province, which creates diversity regarding who is regulated and how. Naturopathy is regulated in only 4 out of 13 provinces and territories (British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario); traditional Chinese medicine is regulated in British Columbia only; and homeopathy is not regulated anywhere in Canada.

Alternative medical systems

Alternative medical systems include complete systems of theory and practice that have evolved independent of and often prior to the conventional biomedical approach. Many are traditional systems of medicine practiced by individual cultures throughout the world, including a number of venerable Asian approaches.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). This system of healing dates back to 200 BC in written form. TCM emphasizes the proper balance of two opposing and inseparable forces: yin and yang. Yin represents the cold, slow, or passive principle, and yang represents the hot, excited, or active principle. Any imbalance of these two forces is thought to lead to blockage in the flow of qi (pronounced “chee” and meaning vital energy) and of blood along pathways known as meridians. TCM consists of a group of techniques and methods, including acupuncture, herbal medicine, oriental massage, and qi gong, to bring the body back into harmony.

The *Chinese Materia Medica* is a standard reference book of information on medicinal substances that are used in Chinese herbal medicine. Herbal compositions are usually adjusted according to individualized diagnoses in TCM,