

Many people use complementary therapies during or after their breast cancer care. Complementary therapies can be used to improve quality of life, reduce stress and relieve side effects of treatment or side effects of the breast cancer itself. They do not treat breast cancer. You may also hear the term integrative therapies.

Types of complementary therapies

Natural products are herbs, vitamins, minerals or microorganisms (such as the bacteria found in yogurt). Examples include black cohosh and probiotics.

Mind and body practices are given or taught by a trained practitioner or teacher. Examples include acupuncture and yoga.

Whole medical systems use many types of therapies. Examples include Ayurveda, homeopathic medicine and Traditional Chinese medicine.

Safety

Unlike standard medical treatments, complementary therapies are not regulated by the federal government and may not have quality controls. Some are safe, but others should be avoided as they can be harmful for people going through cancer treatment. And some are safe at lower doses, but harmful in higher amounts.

Talking with your doctor before using any complementary therapy helps avoid problems. Your doctor can help you understand the risks and benefits of the therapy and whether it might be right for you.

Is complementary therapy right for you?

1. **Talk with your doctor.** Before using any complementary therapy, talk with your doctor. Your doctor can help you understand all the risks and benefits.
2. **Understand what you are doing (or taking).** When considering a complementary therapy, do your research to find out if it is safe and effective. Discuss what you learn with your doctor.
3. **Beware of wild claims.** No complementary therapy can prevent or cure cancer. If this claim is made, it's a sign it's a scam.
4. **Natural does not mean safe.** Although natural products can be appealing, natural does not mean safe (for example, think about poison ivy and poisonous mushrooms). High-dose vitamins can also be unsafe.

Look for “USP verified” on the label of dietary supplements. With dietary supplements, there's no guarantee what's on the label is what's inside. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has limited oversight and doesn't regulate supplements as strictly as medications. Look for the “USP verified” stamp on the label (USP is the U.S. Pharmacopeial Convention) to check that a manufacturer follows good practices.



Choosing supplements from well-known makers may increase the likelihood the:

- ingredient list is accurate and complete
- dose and strength are listed correctly
- supplement is free of harmful contents, like pesticides and heavy metals (such as lead, arsenic or mercury)

6. Choose certified complementary therapy practitioners. A license to practice shows a practitioner has passed the licensing requirements in his or her field. Although seeing a licensed practitioner doesn't always mean you'll get high-quality, safe care, it's a good start.

A word about alternative therapies

Alternative therapies are used instead of standard medical treatments. Standard medical treatments have been proven to reduce the chances of dying from breast cancer. Alternative therapies are not proven treatments and are not recommended.



Questions to ask your doctor

- How do you feel about complementary therapies?
- Have you ever referred someone to a complementary therapy practitioner?
- What's the best way to find a licensed complementary therapy practitioner?
- I would like to use (name complementary therapy), Is it safe to use during or after my breast cancer treatment?
- Are there side effects with (name complementary therapy)?
- Are there clinical trials studying (name complementary therapy)?

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
www.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health at The National Institutes of Health
www.nccam.nih.gov

Natural Medicines
<https://naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com/>

Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS) at the National Institutes of Health
<https://ods.od.nih.gov>

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