

INTEGRATIVE TREATMENTS FOR CHRONIC DISEASE

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The purpose of this article is to summarize the use of integrative treatments by individuals living with chronic disease. A chronic disease is defined as any disease that lasts for at least one year and requires ongoing medical attention or causes a limitation in activities of daily living or both (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2019). Approximately 56% of adults have at least one chronic disease, while 16% of adults have four chronic diseases (Falci, Shi, & Greenlee, 2016). For providers working with older adults, it is likely that roughly one out of every two patients seen in primary care has at least one chronic disease. The most common chronic diseases include heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and chronic kidney disease (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, 2019).

Integrative medicine is defined as a healing-oriented medicine that considers the whole person and includes aspects of one's lifestyle. Rather than replacing traditional medical approaches, integrative medicine includes all therapeutics, including conventional and alternative options (Rakel & Weil, 2012). Patients living with chronic diseases use integrative medicine more than patients without chronic disease. Also as the number of chronic diseases increases, the use of integrative medicine increases (Falci et al., 2016). Therefore, even among gerontological practitioners who do not "buy in to" integrative medicine, it is highly likely that the patients they care for use it.

The evidence to support integrative medicine varies. For example, the use of specific vitamins like vitamin D, B1, and B12 are well supported, especially in patients with known deficiencies. For other therapies like homeopathic remedies, less safety and efficacy data are available (National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health, 2018).

When working with patients who use, or who want to use, an integrative medicine approach, several things are important to consider. First, what is the patient's goal for integrative therapy? Second, is the integrative therapy safe and effective? Helping patients clarify their expectations helps them avoid treatments with little evidence to support their effectiveness. It also helps the practitioner steer the patient towards integrative approaches that are safer and likely to be more effective. For example, patients often seek integrative treatments for chronic pain (Dossett et al., 2016). Highly effective integrative treatments for some types of chronic pain include movement therapy (Exercise is Medicine, 2019), acupuncture (Kawakita & Okada, 2014), and massage (National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health, 2020).

Third, are you treating the underlying problem or the symptoms of the underlying problem? Hopefully, if you treat the underlying problem, the symptoms will fade away. Consider the underlying processes leading to chronic disease. Are the patient's symptoms resulting from a disrupted gut microbiome? Chronic inflammation? Genomics? A combination of these? By treating the patient's underlying health, you help the patient's body heal itself. Finally, find your integrative medicine team. Seek out acupuncturists, nutritionists, exercise professionals, herbalists, and others who have expertise in integrative therapies. A team approach will help patients get the most effective treatment plans for the chronic diseases that ail them.

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