

Smart and Safe Use of Alternative Medicine

Be choosy about practitioners. If you’re going to an alternative health practitioner, such as an [acupuncturist](#), make sure he or she is credentialed, with a state license where appropriate. Check with your primary care doctor to see whether he or she can make a referral. And be skeptical of someone who tries to sell you additional products or sign you up for a long-term treatment plan (beyond four to eight sessions), or recommends that you forgo conventional treatments.

Consider the cost. Ask about price up front, and talk to your insurance company if you’re not sure whether it’s covered; many alternative treatments are not. Also, talk to your provider about nonpharmaceutical options that are more likely to be covered by insurance, such as [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT)

Do your research. Try to find out what’s known about the safety and efficacy of any treatment you’re considering. Look for reputable sources, such as the [and](#) [physical therapy](#).

Think holistically. Sometimes alternative treatments can help you reduce your reliance on medication, avoid surgical intervention, or relieve the side effects of conventional treatments. Just consider how the alternative treatment could affect your health overall, for better or worse. The more serious the health problem, the more cautious you should be about turning to alternative medicine to treat it. Medications you’re already taking can also interact with certain dietary supplements, so talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before trying something new.

Supplement Savvy

People often assume supplements must be proved to be safe and effective before they can be sold. In fact, they don’t undergo the same safety and efficacy testing as prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

Federal regulations allow supplements to have general claims, such as “calcium builds strong bones,” but the FDA doesn’t vet the claims. And labels can’t claim that products diagnose, cure, or prevent any disease. A label can’t say ginkgo biloba, for example, will prevent dementia—even if that’s why people are buying it. You also can’t be sure that supplements contain the listed ingredients or dosages, or that they aren’t contaminated. For example, last spring, nearly 200 people were sickened after consuming kratom supplements contaminated with salmonella.

If you choose to take a supplement, look for a product with a third-party seal, such as NSF International certified or USP Verified. These seals don’t mean that a supplement works; they indicate that an independent group has verified that the amounts listed on labels are accurate and that the products are not contaminated.

See a list of supplements [you should always avoid](#).

Vitamin Wisdom

Nearly half of Americans take multivitamins, but these pills, along with other vitamin and mineral supplements, may not be doing much for anyone's health. "Multivitamins have an image of being able to compensate for deficiencies in the diet," says JoAnn Manson, M.D., a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of preventive medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "But [they'll] never be a substitute for a healthful and balanced diet."

For one, Manson says, your body can't absorb the nutrients from pills as easily as it can from food. And vitamins can cause side effects. Too much supplemental calcium, for instance, might increase the risk of kidney stones.

That doesn't mean everyone should avoid supplements. Pregnant women need folate and prenatal vitamins, and breastfed infants need vitamin D and iron. Older adults and people with certain medical conditions may need vitamins, too. If you're unsure whether you need one, talk with your doctor. And try not to exceed 100 percent of your recommended daily value of any nutrient. (Read more about [vitamins and minerals](#).)

Editor's Note: This article also appeared in the November 2018 issue of Consumer Reports magazine.