

Many people use complementary therapies during or after their breast cancer care. Some use complementary therapies to improve quality of life and relieve side effects of treatment or the breast cancer itself. Complementary therapies are used along with (not instead of) standard medical care. When combined with standard treatments (such as surgery and chemotherapy), complementary therapies may be called integrative therapies.

Complementary therapies should not be used to treat the breast cancer itself.

Types of complementary and integrative therapies

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

Mind and body practices are techniques given or taught by a trained practitioner or teacher.

Examples include:

- Acupressure and acupuncture
- Aromatherapy
- Art therapy and music therapy
- Chiropractic medicine and massage
- Guided imagery
- Meditation and prayer
- Qi gong
- Reflexology
- Reiki
- Yoga

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



Safety of complementary and integrative therapies

Safety is a concern for both standard medical treatments and complementary therapies. Unlike standard medicine, complementary therapies are not regulated by the federal government. So, they may not follow the same safety and quality control standards.

It is a good idea to approach complementary therapies with caution. Some have good safety records and others are known to be unsafe. For others, we simply don't know. Therapies that are believed to be safe may not be safe for everyone. Some can be harmful for people going through cancer treatment.

Is complementary therapy right for you?

1 Talk with your doctor.

If you are thinking about using a complementary therapy, don't decide alone. Your doctor can help make sure the therapy is safe for you to use during your treatment.

- 2 Only use a complementary therapy along with standard treatment.**
Standard cancer treatments have proven benefits. It is not safe to replace them with complementary therapies. It may be fine to use complementary therapies **along with** standard medical treatments if approved by your doctor.
- 3 Understand what you are doing (or taking).**
When considering a complementary therapy, learn all you can about it. Research its safety and effectiveness. Discuss what you have learned with your doctor.
- 4 Beware of wild claims.**
No complementary therapy has been proven to cure cancer. If this claim is made, it's not true. Find out what research has been done. Your doctor can be a good source of this information.
- 5 Natural does not mean safe.**
While the idea of natural products seems like a good idea, natural does not mean safe. Think about poison ivy, poisonous mushrooms and rattlesnakes. High-dose vitamins can also be unsafe.
- 6 Choose trusted brands.**
With dietary supplements, what's on the label may not be what's inside the bottle. Look for the "USP verified" stamp on the label (USP is the U.S. Pharmacopeial Convention). Choose supplements from well-known makers to increase the likelihood the:
 - Supplement listed on the label is what is inside the bottle
 - Dose and potency are listed correctly
 - Supplement is free of harmful contents like pesticides and heavy metals (such as lead, arsenic or mercury)
- 7 Choose certified complementary therapy practitioners.**
Being certified means a practitioner passed the licensing requirements for his or her field. Visiting a certified, licensed practitioner isn't a guarantee you'll get good, safe care, but it's a good start.

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 am using these complementary therapies (name therapies). Should I stop using them during and/or after my breast cancer treatment?
- Should I let you know before I start a new complementary therapy? Which therapies should I avoid?
- Is this complementary therapy (name therapy) safe? Is there research showing it is safe?
- Are there side effects with this complementary therapy (name therapy)?
- Are there clinical trials studying this? complementary therapy (name therapy)?

Resources

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

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
1-888-463-6332
www.fda.gov

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) at The National Institutes of Health
1-888-644-6226
<http://nccam.nih.gov>

Natural Medicines
Information on complementary therapies
<http://naturaldatabase.therapeuticresearch.com>

Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS) at the National Institutes of Health
1-301-435-2920
<https://ods.od.nih.gov>