

If you have ever considered using complementary or alternative medicine, you are not alone. It is estimated that 40 percent of Americans use therapies not considered to be part of conventional medicine. Since many therapies once considered alternative have been proven safe and effective and adopted into conventional health care, this number may be much higher. But are these therapies right for you?



# Complementary and Alternative Medicine

by Cindy Heroux RD

Complementary Alternative Medicine — often referred to as CAM — differs from conventional American medicine in its application and often in its philosophies. Until recently, conventional American medicine primarily has been curative. The emphasis has been on accurately diagnosing an illness or injury and then applying appropriate external treatments, such as medication or surgery, to heal the patient. In contrast, CAM often is more preventative in nature, and much of it is based on the belief that the body can heal itself if provided the necessary tools and encouragement to do so. CAM practitioners tend to see themselves as teachers who empower patients to heal themselves. In addition, they act as facilitators or partners in their care.

Complementary medicine refers to therapies used together with conventional medicine, such as the use of aromatherapy to lessen discomfort following surgery. Alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine, and integrative medicine pairs mainstream medical therapies with CAM therapies, which are supported by scientific evidence.

If you are interested in exploring CAM, it is important

to be an educated consumer and equally important to let your primary care physician know what therapies you are utilizing, especially when it comes to herbs and supplements. Natural doesn't necessarily mean safe, and herbs and supplements can interfere with conventional therapies. They can have negative interactions with prescription drugs, and some have been known to cause serious problems during surgery.

Nutritional supplements and herbs are perhaps the most commonly used CAM therapies. However, therapeutic massage, chiropractic, acupuncture and healing systems, such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), are growing in popularity as people become more familiar with what they are, how they work and the benefits they may offer. Therapies once dismissed as quackery are being embraced by both physicians and hospitals, and integrative medicine is becoming main stream. Here's an introduction to three therapies worth considering:

## ACUPUNCTURE

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, it is believed that just as blood flows through your veins, your life force or *chi* flows along pathways known as *meridians*. Any obstacle or disrup-

tion to this flow can lead to illness or pain. To rebalance the flow of energy, thin needles are inserted at specific points along these meridians, resulting in healing and improved health. Although western scientists do not fully understand how acupuncture works or agree with its underlying principles, studies have shown that it does have medical benefits, especially when it comes to pain management. It also has been shown to help with chemotherapy-induced nausea, and I personally can attest to its value in treating fibromyalgia.

## AROMATHERAPY

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We have all experienced the power of scent — the comfort and anticipation that comes from smelling freshly baked cookies or the stimulation and intrigue of a lover's cologne. Aromatherapists use essential oils, extracts and essences to invoke healing responses and promote health and well being. The oils can be inhaled, added to a warm bath or applied to the skin during massage. Because of their strength, they are usually diluted. Some oils, such as chamomile and lavender, are used for calming, while others, such as peppermint, awaken the senses. Many also have antibacterial or other medicinal properties and are used to treat specific health concerns.

## AYURVEDA

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A holistic therapy practiced in India for thousands of years, Ayurveda (from the Sanskrit words *ayu*, meaning life, and *veda*, meaning knowledge,) is an ancient and comprehensive system of natural medicine. In Ayurveda, it is believed that the health and well-being of the mind, body and consciousness is deeply interconnected and dependent both upon living in harmony with nature and maintaining proper balance of three natural principles known as *doshas*. These principles are called *vata*, associated with movement, *pitta* with metabolism, and *kapha* with structures such as flesh and bones. Recognizing that every person is unique, Ayurvedic practitioners seek to restore balance through a variety of methods, from behaviors, food and herbal preparations to purification therapies involving massage, heat treatments and elimination procedures. Ayurveda also uses sensory approaches, including aromatherapy and color and music therapy, to nourish the mind and body.

Look in next month's issue to learn about other interesting forms of complementary and alternative medicine and to meet some of Orlando's talented practitioners.

Cindy Heroux is a nationally recognized speaker and author of *The Manual That Should Have Come With Your Body*, a simple guide to living healthfully. [speakingofwellness.com](http://speakingofwellness.com)