

Chapter 1

Understanding Complementary Medicine

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out what complementary medicine is all about
 - ▶ Discovering who uses it and the most popular therapies
 - ▶ Exploring what it may be good for
 - ▶ Knowing how to use it safely and effectively
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Complementary medicine is an increasingly popular form of healthcare in the Western world. Millions of consultations take place every year, and according to some surveys, almost one in three people have tried it. People with chronic conditions, such as long-term pain, make use of complementary medicine particularly frequently.

Gradually, acceptance of complementary medicine is increasing in orthodox medical circles with more and more doctors training in, or referring patients for, complementary therapies or incorporating complementary practitioners into their practices. You can find complementary medicine in hospitals, specialist clinics, hospices, schools, beauty clinics, and gyms.

At the same time, people are becoming more discerning about the complementary therapies that they use and asking for proof of effectiveness and safety. Practitioners are increasingly well trained and many of their professional associations have been working hard to raise standards.

In this chapter, you can find out exactly what complementary medicine is, who uses it, and what the most popular forms of complementary therapy are. You'll also find out how to decide which therapy may be appropriate for you and how you can assess its safety and effectiveness.

Finding Out about Complementary Medicine

This section starts right at the beginning by sorting out the confusion over names used to describe this form of therapy.

What do all the names mean?



At one time, people often used the term *alternative medicine* because people tended to select this therapy as an alternative to mainstream medicine – that is, the medicine practised by doctors and nurses and offered in GP surgeries, hospitals, and so on. Mainstream medicine is generally referred to as *orthodox*, *allopathic*, or *conventional* medicine. So, alternative medicine has also sometimes been called *unconventional* or *unorthodox* medicine.

Some practitioners liked the term alternative medicine, because they believed their approach did provide a real alternative to orthodox healthcare. However, others felt the term was too confrontational, creating a ‘them’ and ‘us’ situation between medics and alternative medicine practitioners. These people preferred the term *complementary medicine*, because they saw their work as complementary to orthodox medicine and believed the two were perfectly capable of working alongside one another.



Gradually, the term *CAM* – *complementary and alternative medicine* – evolved to reconcile these two perspectives and has been quite widely used. However, as CAM therapies become more incorporated into the mainstream, people are dropping the word ‘alternative’. Also, the term CAM is itself now making way for the buzz phrase *integrated medicine*, referring to what Prince Charles calls ‘the best of both worlds’. This incorporates the best of both orthodox and complementary approaches to provide the most appropriate form of healthcare for different health problems and individuals.

For this book, I use the terms complementary medicine and complementary therapies because these are currently two of the most widely used and recognised. However, I myself see complementary medicine as part of the wider whole of healthcare – drawing on the best of tried and tested ancient medical traditions, pioneering new and modern forms of healthcare, and integrating with existing medical practices. I also believe that rigorous training standards, research, and evaluation of the different therapies are essential to ensure that they’re safe and effective for public use.

From ancient to modern – Ayurveda today

Ayurveda – the ancient medical system of India – is a good example of how a traditional medical system now takes a place in both the complementary and orthodox worlds. It dates back well over 2,000 years but is still the most widely practised form of medicine in India and is now also popular in several Western countries. Ayurveda's herbal remedies, massage, and healing practices are hugely popular – with celebrities, sports personalities, and even royalty giving them glowing

endorsements. Yet, doctors are starting to take it seriously as well. As one example, the plant *Gymnema sylvestre* has been found to help balance blood sugar levels and some now believe that it may have a useful role to play in the treatment of diabetes. Other researchers have investigated the role of single or combination Ayurvedic remedies for health conditions such as liver and heart problems.

What is complementary medicine?

What actually comes under the complementary medicine umbrella? Ancient traditions provide the roots of complementary medicine: the medical systems of China, India, Tibet, and so on that also incorporate influences from the traditions of ancient Greece, Persia, and elsewhere. Some people believe that these traditions shouldn't even really be classed as alternative or complementary because they've been practised for thousands of years. However, their revitalisation and popularity today puts them firmly in the frame of modern health approaches. Good examples of these are Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Tibetan medicine, and Kanpo (Japanese herbal medicine).

Some of the most popular complementary therapies today developed directly from these ancient roots – for example, acupuncture is a part of Traditional Chinese Medicine and has developed over thousands of years. Others have been developed more recently, such as osteopathy, which developed from the work of US Army doctor Andrew Taylor Still in the 19th century.

Five types of therapies are particularly well-established in the UK: Osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, herbalism (Western and other forms such as Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese herbal medicine), and homeopathy. In the US, Australia, and Germany naturopathy is also a predominant and well-regulated form of treatment. Other therapies, such as nutritional therapy, are growing in popularity too.



Some of these complementary therapies have become increasingly mainstream. Osteopathy and chiropractic, for example, are now regulated by law in the UK, included under many health insurance schemes, practised on the National Health Service (NHS), and used for referral by GPs for health problems such as back and neck pain. In fact, for some people these therapies are no longer regarded as complementary at all but are considered as professions allied to medicine.

However, this situation doesn't mean that all therapies are immune to controversy. A subtle form of osteopathy, known as *cranial osteopathy*, has been particularly under attack (read more about this in Chapter 14), and homeopathy, developed in the 18th century in Germany by Dr Samuel Hahnemann, excites major disagreement as to whether it is effective or 'all in the mind' (jump to Chapter 10 to work out your views on that one).

Other less well-established therapies are regarded by many as truly weird and wacky. These include crystal, colour, and light therapy, chakra healing, and so on. Yet each of these therapies also has many serious and committed practitioners and research may yet confirm their effectiveness.



In this book, I aim to cover as many as I can of the therapies that you are likely to come across, or want to consider using, and to present a balanced view for each. Go to Part II to find out more about the traditional medical systems, to Part III for more on some of the most popular therapies, to Part IV for more on manipulation and massage therapies, or to Part V for healing and other mind/body therapies. I tell you exactly what each therapy involves and what it may be good for, but I also point out potential dangers and how you may distinguish the charlatans from the professionals.

What's the evidence?



Complementary medicine can generate huge amounts of controversy, with the argument ranging between those who are convinced that it works to those who are dead set against it and determined that it's all 'quackery'. Probably a middle path is a more reasonable approach, where each therapy is considered in the clear light of evidence examining its effectiveness.

Critics often argue that little or no good research supports the use of complementary medicine, but this simply isn't true. Many of the well-established therapies, such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, naturopathy, osteopathy and chiropractic, have quite a number of good quality scientific studies on their use. Research has been carried out around the world, including in Europe, the US, China, Japan, and India. However, researchers often find it difficult to get funding for this kind of research (only a tiny portion of public or private money is spent on complementary medicine research compared to medical research in most countries) and many early studies have design flaws. More good quality research is underway and much needed.

Other therapies, however, have little or no scientific research to back them up, although they may have lots of anecdotal evidence – that is, accounts of people who claim to have benefited from the therapy. However, this type of evidence is not enough to 'prove' that the therapy is effective and is rarely enough to convince sceptics. Lack of evidence may be a reason to approach the therapy with caution but it doesn't necessarily mean that it is ineffective.

All in the mind?



Some critics argue that complementary medicine is all *placebo*, that is, that the treatments work simply because the patients want them to work rather than through any value of their own and that benefits are ‘all in the mind’ or are due to the increased personal attention and time spent with patients in complementary consultations. The growing body of scientific evidence doesn’t really justify such a claim and yet all treatments involve placebo to some extent. For example, studies have shown that, even in orthodox medicine, patients do better if they have strong confidence in their doctor or the treatment/medicine that they’re receiving. So some researchers argue that placebo is a power to be harnessed rather than dismissed.

Prince Charles famously said, ‘The unorthodoxy of today may well become the orthodoxy of tomorrow’, and so it may prove that some of the therapies that are so maligned and ridiculed now prove to be accepted and commonplace in years to come.

Going carefully but breaking down barriers



Carefully investigating what sort of evidence is available before deciding to undergo a particular therapy is certainly worthwhile. However, also remember that orthodox, or conventional, medicine is itself relatively new, and many of its treatments have also developed through trial and error and even accident (such as the discovery of penicillin!). Many of its medicines, such as aspirin, are based on old herbal remedies and even extensive medical research cannot always guarantee safety. In fact, certain orthodox treatments have triggered terrible side effects (consider thalidomide) and the British Medical Journal has concluded that many have only limited or unknown proven effectiveness. So complementary medicine deserves the chance to be carefully considered and investigated, along with other forms of medicine, rather than being rejected simply because it is unconventional. Building barriers may in fact obstruct new learning that could be beneficial to health!

Using Complementary Medicine

Complementary medicine is now a massive growth industry, with its usage and range of therapies and products increasing all the time. Complementary medicine is used by people of all ages and for a wide range of complaints. Traditionally, women have been the most common users of complementary medicine, but men are catching up and children are often seen by complementary medicine practitioners too.

Complementary medicine: A holistic approach

A special feature of many complementary therapies is their *holistic approach*. Rather than focusing solely on your ailment, the practitioner is likely to be interested in your overall health and will spend time with you, asking about your diet and lifestyle, attempting to build up a picture of how one aspect of your health impacts on another.

This approach is in line with the World Health Organisation's definition of health as a 'complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being' and not simply the absence of disease.

Because of this holistic focus, people with the same ailment may be treated quite differently according to their individual make-up or needs. For example, two asthma sufferers may have similar symptoms and yet be given different types of herbs, homeopathic remedies, or acupuncture treatments by the same practitioner according to the diagnosis of their overall state of health and the perceived underlying cause of their condition.

The aim of this holistic approach is often the restoration of *homeostasis* or body balance, which is believed to facilitate the body's own self-healing mechanisms.

Typical users are people who are generally interested in health and diet and who are strongly motivated to look after their own health. They may also be disenchanted with, or have been failed by, conventional medicine, such as those with chronic illnesses for which Western medicine has little to offer. Other users include people with serious illnesses who want to use complementary medicine alongside orthodox medicine – such as people with cancer who may undergo chemotherapy and also choose to utilise nutritional therapy or healing therapies alongside this treatment.

In the UK, patients have access to complementary therapies via the National Health Service (NHS) in GP surgeries, hospitals, and clinics. As one recent example, in Northern Ireland in October 2006 a new scheme was announced by the Health Minister offering £200,000 worth of complementary services as part of health service treatment.

Things you need to check out: Safety and effectiveness



If you decide to try out any form of complementary medicine for yourself, first consider the following:

- ✓ Find out as much as you can about the therapy. Check the appropriate section in this book to find out what it involves, what it may be good for, what evidence supports its use, and what the safety warnings or possible side effects are.

- ✔ Check out the qualifications and experience of any practitioner you're thinking of consulting. Don't be afraid to ask questions and to ask for an explanation of letters after the practitioner's name, their membership of a professional and/or regulatory body, and their years of experience – particularly with your specific type of health problem. Check out individual chapters in this book for more details on all these issues for each therapy and its practitioners. Don't use unqualified, unregistered practitioners that aren't members of a reputable professional body.
- ✔ Check that the practitioner is fully insured and follows standards for safe practice, such as using disposable needles for acupuncture and disposing of them properly (again, more details on safety appear in each chapter of this book).
- ✔ Ask about and consider the number of treatments that you're likely to need, what sort of improvements you may expect, and what the likely costs are. Investigate whether the therapy is available on the NHS or covered by health insurance if you have any.
- ✔ Consider consulting or informing your doctor about having complementary medicine. Very few people do inform their doctor about this, fearing that such information won't be well received, but many doctors are now better informed and open to complementary medicine, and most complementary practitioners are happy to communicate with GPs too.
- ✔ If in doubt, seek advice from one of the professional organisations mentioned in the various chapters of this book.

What's complementary medicine good for?

Complementary therapies can have a real role to play alongside orthodox medicine, especially for the treatment of long-standing conditions that don't readily respond to conventional treatments, such as back and neck pain, osteoarthritis of the knee, nausea, stress, anxiety, and depression.

In fact, lots of people would like to see complementary therapies made more readily available. A recent National Health Service poll asked if the NHS should fund certain complementary therapies and 7,030 people responded. The affirmative results included 84 per cent for acupuncture, 74 per cent for reflexology, 71 per cent for homeopathy, 52 per cent for shiatsu, and 19 per cent for crystal therapy. Just 4 per cent of poll participants wanted none of the therapies made available. (Chiropractic and osteopathy were excluded from the poll because they are now regulated.)

Many therapies make claims to treat a wide range of illnesses, and gradually research trials are taking place to check these out. Some trials have not given any substantial proof that the therapy works, but others have indicated that real benefits may exist. Examples are trials that suggest that acupuncture can help neck pain, osteopathy can ease back pain, and homeopathy can relieve hay fever, although even these studies aren't immune to criticism.

In each chapter in this book, I list the type of ailments for which some research evidence exists that the therapy may be beneficial.



'Natural' does not necessarily mean 'better', 'safe', or even 'effective'. Complementary therapies should not be regarded as a substitute for orthodox medical care in case of serious health concerns. Well-trained complementary practitioners are taught how to spot serious medical conditions that require medical referral but not all therapists have had this training. If you're in any doubt about your condition, consult your GP.

Choosing the Right Complementary Therapy

Choosing the right complementary therapy is always tricky. You need to consider the nature of your ailment, the track record for resolving it with different therapies, any evidence of effectiveness, and any possible side effects or negative outcomes. In practice, the most common ways that people choose a therapy is by word of mouth from friends or colleagues, by recommendation from a GP or other practitioner, or by reading or learning about the therapy from a book, TV, radio programme, or the Internet.



To start you off, Table 1-1 may help point you in the right direction, but delve into the chapters in the rest of this book to find out more.

Table 1-1 Finding the Right Complementary Therapy

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Therapy*</i>
Painful or aching joints, stiffness, sports injuries	Consider one of the manipulation or massage therapies in Part IV or acupuncture (Chapter 9).
Tired all the time, menstrual or menopausal problems, problems with memory or concentration	Consider nutritional therapy (Chapter 12).
Feeling sluggish, bowel or urinary problems, skin problems	Consider naturopathy (Chapters 8 and 13) or herbal medicine (Chapter 11).
Respiratory problems such as hay fever or asthma, migraines, headaches, or childhood ailments	Homeopathy (Chapter 10) or herbal remedies (Chapter 11) may bring relief, or try Traditional Chinese Medicine (Chapter 4).

Problem	Therapy*
Stressed out, anxious, irritable, and not sleeping well	Explore relaxation, breathing, and healing therapies. Aromatherapy can help, too. (All are covered in Part V.)
Digestive problems, blood sugar imbalance, Type II diabetes, gall bladder problems	Ayurveda, Japanese, or Tibetan medicine (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) or nutritional therapy (Chapter 12) may bring relief.
You're really motivated and in search of some self-help tips that you can try out at home	Check out the health tips in Part VI.

** Please note that this table represents a very simplified set of recommendations to get you started. Many therapies treat the same types of health problems and a lot depends on your personal preferences. Remember that many of the above problems may also require medical investigation to rule out serious health concerns.*

Counting the Cost of Complementary Therapies

Because the majority of complementary therapy treatments aren't covered by the NHS or health insurance, the costs can soon mount up. Typical costs per session are around £25 to £35 but can be as little as £15 (such as in teaching clinics) or as much as £100 or more for top private specialists in expensive locations.

So instead of throwing your hard-earned money away, give yourself a budget to work with and ask your practitioner a few questions such as the following:

- ✔ How many treatments am I likely to need before I start to see results?
- ✔ What kind of improvements can I reasonably expect?
- ✔ How much experience have you had in treating my particular condition?
- ✔ What sort of success has your treatment led to?
- ✔ What is the total cost of my treatment likely to be?
- ✔ Are any other additional costs expected, such as supplements, herbs, or other remedies or goods?
- ✔ Do you do any discounts for block booking a series of treatments?

Staying healthy

Even if you get the best therapist and therapy in the world, your health and healing still rest to some extent in your own hands. Help yourself by practising the following:

- ✔ Start each day in a positive frame of mind.
- ✔ Eat healthily and sensibly, with lots of fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and other healthy proteins, and avoid junk foods, saturated fats, and excess sugars and salt.
- ✔ Drink plenty of fresh water; eight glasses sipped during the course of the day is a good amount to aim for.
- ✔ Get regular exercise of both the vigorous (aerobic) and gentle, stretching (such as yoga, pilates, and t'ai chi) varieties. Two to three sessions a week of at least 20 minutes – enough to build up a bit of a sweat – is a good goal.
- ✔ B-r-e-a-t-h-e well! Lots of people simply stop breathing when they are concentrating, or they breathe very shallowly. Focus on your breath at regular intervals during the day and ensure even, free breaths. (Check out the section on Buteyko breathing in Chapter 18 if you want a way to really improve your breathing habits.)
- ✔ Limit your vices! Moderate alcohol intake and stop or at least cut down on the cigarettes.
- ✔ De-stress. Practise stress management and aim for a good work-rest-play life balance with time for socialising, creativity, and enjoyment.
- ✔ Get plenty of good quality sleep.
- ✔ End each day with gratitude for everything in your life.

Of course, getting exact answers to each of these queries may not be possible, because a lot depends on how your body responds to the treatment, but at least you gain a reasonable idea of what to expect.



Full benefits may take time, so don't give up after only one treatment if you haven't experienced earth-shattering results. But equally, don't go on and on with treatment hoping it will make a difference if nothing is happening.