Article Series Mental Health

9 Questions to Ask About Complementary Therapies

4 min read

☐ Like (0) Likes

Bookmark

Share

Print



All Mental Health

Resize

A A A

Complementary therapies won’t replace cancer treatment — but some may help you feel more empowered. With your care team’s guidance, you can build a plan that supports you.

From yoga and meditation to herbs and acupuncture, these practices fall under the umbrella of integrative medicine — blending conventional treatment with supportive therapies. Research shows there’s a portion of people living with cancer using

complementary therapies.

Some can ease nausea, fatigue, stress, pain and worry. And for many, choosing them feels like you're playing an active role in your healing.

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's About Herbs database, can help you explore more about common herbs and other dietary supplements.

But before you dive in, here's what to know.

1. **Why talk to my care team first?**

   It's essential you discuss all complementary therapies with your care team. Herbs, vitamins, and supplements aren't closely regulated and may interact with treatments. Always check in with your doctor before starting anything new — it's the best way to make sure your plan is appropriate.

2. **Are there any complementary therapies for nausea (extreme sickness) or fatigue (extreme tiredness)?**

   The herbal supplements that have been studied to help relieve nausea include ginger, peppermint, and chamomile. American ginseng has been studied for possible benefits in managing cancer-related tiredness. Talk to your care team before trying them. Herbs can affect how your body absorbs treatment.

3. **Are there any complementary therapies for pain?**

   Some plant-based remedies may help. But — and you're going to hear this a lot — check with your doctor first. Herbs can interact with medications or thin your blood. And some additives to herbal treatments – like piperine – can interact with medicine as well.

   Below are some complementary therapies that may help with pain:

   1. Turmeric for inflammation.
   2. Ginger for headaches and muscle pain.
   3. Willow bark for general pain.
   4. Boswellia for joint pain.
   5. Devil's claw for muscle soreness.

4. **Should I worry about side effects or drug interactions?**

   Yes. That’s why a conversation with your oncologist or pharmacist matters. Some supplements can blunt the effects of cancer treatments. Others can overstimulate your immune system — which may seem like a benefit if your immune system is low, but may in fact be problematic for people with certain types of cancer.

5. **Should I take food supplements to fight cancer?**

   A balanced diet can support your nutritional needs during cancer, but you also may benefit from supplements if you’re low on certain nutrients or need to support your nutrient intake. It’s important to speak with your doctor about supplements before starting anything, as not all nutrients are helpful for people with cancer. In fact, high doses of certain nutrients — like vitamin A or E — can be harmful. Talk to your care team if you’re worried about not getting enough nutrients.

6. **Are supplements useful after treatment?**

   Unless you have a deficiency, not really. Most people living with cancer get everything they need from food. Stick with a balanced diet unless your care team suggests otherwise and avoid mega-doses of any nutrient.

7. **What about non-supplement approaches?**

   Mind and body therapies like meditation and yoga can be a source of comfort when living with cancer. These practices can be adapted to your energy level, but you still should discuss any new practices with your care team before starting.

   1. Meditation may help calm your mind and ease anxiety.
   2. Yoga combines movement, stretching, and breathing to support both body and spirit.
   3. Acupuncture uses fine needles to potentially reduce pain, nausea, or fatigue.

8. **How do I find an integrative medicine doctor?**

   Start with your own care team — they often know specialists who can help people living with cancer. Hospitals and medical schools may also have integrative medicine programs.

   When you're interviewing a practitioner, you may wish to ask:

   1. Do you regularly work with cancer patients?
   2. Will you coordinate with my oncology team?
   3. How many years have you been practicing?
   4. Are your approaches rooted in evidence?

   An integrative approach combines conventional cancer treatments with supportive practices like nutrition, movement, stress management, and mind–body techniques. The goal is not to replace medical care but to help cope with side effects, provide comfort and strengthen overall well-being. Everyone's needs are different, so it's important to check with your doctor before trying any new approach to make sure it's appropriate for you.

Developed with Thrive Global