

## Complementary and alternative medicine: making informed decisions

Having cancer can make people feel frightened and vulnerable. Deciding on the right treatment can be difficult and confusing. This information sheet is for patients and their families who are interested in complementary and alternative treatments for cancer.

The Cancer Council supports people wanting to explore different treatment choices. We want you to have reliable information so you can get the best outcome.

Unfortunately, there are people who falsely promote treatments that don't work or are even dangerous as 'cancer cures'. There are also people who wrongly claim that mainstream or conventional treatments such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormone therapies don't work. These people are acting unethically.

We hope this information sheet will help you recognise which treatments may be harmful or unethical.

This information sheet is not a substitute for talking to your doctors or nurses. Please use it as a guide to help you think about the questions you want to ask.

You may hear doctors or nurses call these treatments 'complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)'.

Visit [www.cancervic.org.au/treatments](http://www.cancervic.org.au/treatments) or call the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 to find out more and ask for a copy of the booklet *Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies*.

### What is the difference between medical, complementary and alternative treatments?

- Your cancer doctor will tell you about *medical cancer treatments*. These are recommended because there is scientific evidence they work and are known to be the best treatment option. Medical treatments are also known as 'mainstream', 'conventional' or 'standard' treatments. Many medical treatments have been well researched and there is reliable data to prove they can control or cure certain types of cancer. For example, chemotherapy and radiotherapy have been studied extensively.
- *Complementary therapies* are used with medical treatment to help manage the symptoms and side effects of cancer. Complementary therapies are generally safe to use **with** your medical treatment – they may even make you feel better. Some complementary therapies have been shown to be helpful in relieving the stress and anxiety related to having cancer and its treatment, for example, massage, counselling and music therapy.
- *Alternative cancer therapies* are used **instead of** medical treatment. Alternative therapies are often unproven and sometimes harmful. They may be falsely promoted as an effective treatment or cure for cancer. Some alternative therapies have been studied and shown to be ineffective and in some cases harmful and possibly even fatal. These include laetrile (so-called vitamin B17) and extreme diets that eliminate entire food groups. In some cases, high doses

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of vitamins and antioxidants (e.g. vitamins A, C and E), may also be harmful. The side effects of alternative therapies are often unknown.

You need to find out as much as you can about any treatment you are thinking of using. Use this information sheet as a guide. Also talk to your medical team. You may also wish to search the websites and contact services at the end of the information sheet.

## Alternative therapies

There are hundreds of alternative cancer therapies. You may hear about them from friends and family, or come across them in books, on the Internet or on radio, TV, etc. *There is no science-based evidence to prove they can treat, control or cure any type of cancer.*

The Cancer Council is aware of several providers of such therapies in Australia and overseas. We respond to calls about them through the Cancer Council Helpline.

These sorts of therapies include:

- extreme diets
- very high doses of vitamins and dietary supplements
- metabolic treatments, which are said to 'train' the immune system to get rid of cancer
- injections of unknown substances
- treatments that increase body temperature (hyperthermia)
- high PH therapy
- laetrile (also known as vitamin B17)
- mistletoe extract
- shark cartilage
- devices called parasite/energy zappers

- coffee enemas or other 'cleansing' approaches such as colonic irrigation
- 'photodynamic' therapy
- treatments using oxygen, ozone, water, magnets or microwaves.

Sometimes one or several of these treatments are offered as part of a 'health package' for cancer patients to 'cleanse their system' and help 'cure' their cancer.

Cancer Council Victoria recommends that you talk with your doctor before using any cancer therapy that does not have any scientific evidence to prove it helps.

Use the 'Useful resources' named at the end of this information sheet. You may also like to read our booklet *Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies*.

## How alternative therapies may harm you

There are several ways that alternative therapies may cause you harm.

### Physically

Some alternative therapies may be painful or cause injury, malnutrition, disfigurement and imbalances within your body. Risks include cyanide poisoning from apricot pits or laetrile, brain damage from hyperthermia or severe malnutrition from extreme diets.

They can also cause physical harm if people delay having standard treatment that could cure their cancer.

Some people are advised by an alternative therapist not to take pain-relievers. This is bad advice. Being in pain can be very distressing for you and those close to you. It can almost always be relieved with the right medical treatment. Read our information sheet *Common Questions about Cancer Pain*.

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## Emotionally

Alternative therapies often hold out false hope of cure. This means patients and their families may lose precious time seeking a therapy when they could be spending time with those close to them. You may become confused about the right treatment for your situation. If the alternative therapy doesn't work, you may feel very let down. You may become more desperate than you were before.

Some unethical therapists may suggest you may have caused your cancer yourself – perhaps because of your behaviours or beliefs. There have even been reports of unethical therapists saying someone's cancer did not shrink or disappear because they did not follow their advice: for example, they did not stay on a diet long enough or pray or meditate hard enough. *There is no evidence that your attitude or the way that you think causes cancer or prevents a treatment from working.*

## Financially

You could be asked to pay large sums of money upfront for alternative cancer therapies. There have been reports of sums of between \$10,000 and \$35,000 for a 'package of care'. Some therapists use corrupt methods and make false promises to convince you to pay for treatment.

## How will I know what's false?

People have become much sicker, lost a lot of weight, spent all their life savings, mortgaged their homes, or even died from using a cancer therapy that was falsely promoted as a cure.

Be very wary if a therapist:

- Tries to convince you your cancer has been caused by a poor diet or stress: they will claim they can treat or cure your cancer with a special diet.
- Promises a cure for your cancer or to detoxify, purify or revitalise your body. You may be told there will be quick, dramatic and wonderful results – a miracle cure.
- Uses false claims, not science-based evidence from clinical trials. They may cite 'scientific studies' that turn out to be non-existent, not relevant, poorly designed or out of date. Recognised medical journals are listed at [www.pubmed.com](http://www.pubmed.com). See the section about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).
- Warns you doctors are trying to hide the 'real cure for cancer'. They may advise you not to trust your doctor.
- Provides false credentials.
- Charges you a lot of money and asks for it upfront.

## Avoiding the use of harmful therapies

Research each therapy before deciding to use it. This will help you make an informed decision.

- Ask questions. How long has the therapist practised? Have they treated cancer patients before? What do they expect you to gain from the therapy?
- Find out how much the therapy is going to cost. How many sessions or quantities of the product are recommended? Does the cost cover flights and accommodation if travel is involved?
- Don't pay for any product or therapy over the Internet or upfront before you understand its pros and cons.
- Always check the qualifications of the therapist. This is not always easy. Sometimes there is a group that represents therapists, like a professional

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association. Ask if the therapist is registered. Otherwise, contact the Cancer Council Helpline on **13 11 20** for advice.

- Ask if they have a code of practice and ethics, as well as disciplinary and complaints procedures (they ought to). Ask the therapist if they follow these codes and procedures. If not, we do not recommend you use them.
- Ask the therapist if they are happy to call your medical doctor to discuss the treatment they are proposing.
- Talk with your doctor and other health professionals you trust. Be honest about any type of therapy you are thinking about using. It may be helpful to take them a copy of our *Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM): Communicating with Patients* information sheet.
- Read our booklet *Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies* to find out which therapies are safe and for more about talking with your doctor.

## Using the Internet

There are thousands of websites about unproven cancer therapies. There is no control on what is on these websites. Many of these sites are misleading and even outright dishonest. It is important you are able to pick a reliable website. Read the section 'Searching the Internet' in the *Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies* booklet.

## Summing it up

You need to feel confident about your treatment choices and those treating and caring for you. You have the right to choose whatever treatment you want.

Be sure to make your decisions based on good information. Make an informed choice by researching your options well. Don't feel pressure to use a treatment. Choose treatments that have been shown in science-based studies to help treat, control or cure your type of cancer. If in doubt, always ask for help from people you respect (medical team, family and friends).

## Questions for your doctor

- Which therapies are safe to use?
- Are any of these therapies harmful? What are the possible side effects?
- How do I find a safe therapist I can trust?
- What might I expect to gain?
- Is there any science-based research to prove these treatments?
- Where can I find reliable information?
- Can I ask my complementary therapist to let you know about my treatment and progress?

## Useful websites

[www.cancervic.org.au/treatments](http://www.cancervic.org.au/treatments)

This is the Cancer Council Victoria website. It has information about complementary and alternative therapies.

[www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/1979.cfm](http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/1979.cfm)

This is the website of a leading cancer hospital and research centre (Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center) in New York. It researches complementary therapies for cancer. You can search 'Information Resource, About herbs, botanicals and other products'. It has consumer and health professional information. It lists side effects, drug interactions, clinical information and clinical trials.

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## **nccam.nih.gov**

This is the website of an American government body that researches complementary and alternative therapies.

## **Other useful resources**

### **Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20**

You can speak with one of our cancer nurses. They have information about all types of cancer treatments. They can help you plan your questions and guide you in the right direction.

### **Health Services Commissioner**

This organisation can help if you have a complaint against a health service provider.

Telephone: 8601 5200

Toll free: 1800 136 066

Facsimile: 8601 5219

Email: [hsc@dhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:hsc@dhs.vic.gov.au)

For more information call **13 11 20**.

This information was developed with funding from the State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services.

Reviewed by Annie Angle, cancer nurse (Dip. Oncology Nursing, Royal Marsden, London) November 2010.

