

## What is Complementary, Alternative, and Integrative Health?

Many Americans—more than 30 percent of adults and about 12 percent of children—use health care approaches that may have started outside of usual Western practice. When describing these approaches, people often use “alternative” and “complementary” similarly, but the two terms refer to different concepts:

- If a non-mainstream practice is used **together with** conventional medicine, it is considered “complementary.”
- If a non-mainstream practice is used **in place of** conventional medicine, it is considered “alternative.”

True alternative medicine is uncommon. Most people who use non-mainstream approaches use them along with conventional treatments.

### Integrative Health

Integrative health care has many definitions often brings conventional and complementary approaches together in a coordinated way. It emphasizes a holistic, patient-focused approach to health care and wellness—often including mental, emotional, functional, spiritual, social, and community aspects—and treating the whole person rather than, for example, one organ system. It aims for well-coordinated care between different providers and institutions. The use of integrative approaches to health and wellness has grown within care settings across the United States. Researchers are currently exploring the potential benefits of integrative health in a variety of situations, including pain management for military personnel and veterans, relief of symptoms in cancer patients and survivors, and programs to promote healthy behaviors.

### Types of Complementary Health Approaches

Complementary health approaches include natural products and mind and body practices.

### *Natural Products*

This group includes a variety of products, such as:

- **Herbs** (also known as botanicals)
- **Vitamins and minerals**
- **Probiotics.** (Readily available to consumers, and often sold as **dietary supplements.**)

Researchers have done large, rigorous studies on a few natural products, but the results often showed that the products didn't work for the conditions studied. Research on others is in progress. While there are indications that some may be helpful, more needs to be learned about the effects of these products in the human body, and about their safety and potential interactions with medicines and other natural products.

### *Mind and Body Practices*

Mind and body practices include a large and diverse group of procedures or techniques administered or taught by a trained practitioner or teacher. The 2012 NHIS showed that yoga, chiropractic and osteopathic manipulation, meditation, and massage therapy are among the most popular mind and body practices used by adults. The popularity of yoga has grown dramatically in recent years, with almost twice as many U.S. adults practicing yoga in 2012 as in 2002.

Other mind and body practices include acupuncture, relaxation techniques (such as breathing exercises, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation), tai chi, qi gong, healing touch, hypnotherapy, and movement therapies (such as Feldenkrais method, Alexander technique, Pilates, Rolfing Structural Integration, and Trager psychophysical integration). The amount of research on mind and body approaches varies widely depending on the practice. For example, researchers have done many studies on acupuncture, yoga, spinal manipulation, and meditation, but there have been fewer studies on some other practices.

### **More information**

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TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: [nccih.nih.gov](http://nccih.nih.gov)

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