

ARTHRITIS COMPLEMENTARY/ ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE (CAM)

WHAT ARE COMPLEMENTARY/ ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES (CAMs)?

Complementary/alternative medicines (CAMs) are treatments that have not shown in repeated and controlled scientific studies that they work and are safe. Proven treatments for arthritis must show in repeated, controlled scientific tests that they work by meeting the following goals:

- Reduce pain
- Reduce inflammation
- Improve function

Proven treatments also must show how safe they are. The benefits of a treatment in controlling arthritis should be greater than the risk of unwanted or harmful effects. Even if a CAM is harmless, it can still have a detrimental effect if it causes a person to stop proven treatments that control arthritis. The following are examples of CAMs:

Harmless:

- Copper bracelets
- Mineral springs
- Vibrators
- Vinegar and honey

Harmful:

- DMSO (Dimethyl sulfoxide)
- Large doses of vitamins
- Drugs with hidden ingredients such as steroids
- Snake venom

WHY DO PEOPLE WITH ARTHRITIS TRY CAMS?

Arthritis may be painful, potentially disabling and frequently chronic. Treatments vary for each type of arthritis. People often have the misconception that nothing can be done. Some physicians are not experienced in evaluating and managing the many types of arthritis. Consequently, the patient may not receive a diagnosis or be placed on the appropriate medication(s) and non-pharmacological approaches. When a successful treatment program is prescribed, it may change over time as the disease changes. Many people with arthritis become discouraged with this process and hope for a quick and easy answer.

Arthritis symptoms may come and go. A person using a CAM may mistakenly think the therapy worked simply because they tried it when symptoms were going into a natural remission.

People with arthritis may seem to improve because of the “placebo effect.” The power of positive thinking may cause someone to temporarily feel better. The improvement usually may last only a short time, and the underlying disease continues.

COST OF COMPLEMENTARY/ ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES

An estimated \$10 billion is spent yearly on CAMs. One in 10 people who have tried a CAM report harmful side effects, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services survey. Any CAM, no matter how harmless, can become harmful if it stops or delays someone from seeking a prescribed treatment program from an experienced physician.

HOW CAN PEOPLE DETERMINE IF A THERAPY IS A CAM?

It may be hard to spot a CAM at first glance. The only information about a therapy may be what is provided by promoters. People with arthritis should be cautious if the proposed therapy falls into one or more of the following categories:

- Works for all types of arthritis and other diseases — There are more than 120 types of arthritis, and treatments may vary for each kind.
- Uses case histories and testimonials — Claims of individuals helped by a treatment need to be backed up by repeated studies on large numbers of people.
- Cites only one study — A single study may get results that other studies cannot repeat. A number of scientists must repeat the same study and get similar results for a treatment to be considered proven. A single study may, however, suggest a treatment that may have promise and should be studied further.
- Cites a study without a control group — The use of a control group helps show that the results are due to the new treatment and not some other factor.
- Does not list contents — Some ads for a miracle drug for arthritis actually are just promoting aspirin at a high price. Other treatments have been found to contain corticosteroids and other powerful drugs. These drugs may have severe side effects and should not be taken without a doctor’s supervision.
- Has no warnings about side effects — There should be warnings on the label or instructions stating who should not use the treatment.
- Claims to be based on a secret formula — Scientists share their discoveries so that other experts in arthritis can review and question their findings.

WHAT SHOULD SOMEONE DO IF THEY DECIDE TO TRY A CAM?

- Check with a physician or local chapter of the Arthritis Foundation to find out what is known about the effects and safety of the therapy before trying it or telling others about it.
- Let a physician know what he or she is thinking about trying.
- **Continue regular medical care for arthritis.**

RESOURCES

More information about arthritis treatments can be obtained from the following organizations:

Arthritis Foundation
Greater Chicago Chapter
800-735-0096

Arthritis Foundation
Greater Illinois Chapter
800-795-9115

American College of Rheumatology
404-633-3777

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
301-495-4484
www.nih.gov/niams

Information compiled from the National Arthritis Foundation