

**Patient information: Alternative medicine (The Basics)**

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What is alternative medicine?** — Alternative medicine is any treatment or technique that is supposed to help with health but is not part of mainstream medicine. People sometimes refer to alternative medicine as “complementary medicine.”

Examples of alternative medicine include:

- **Acupuncture** – People having acupuncture have thin needles inserted into their skin in different places. The needles do not hurt, or they hurt very little.
- **Herbal remedies** – Herbal remedies are usually pills or liquids that contain substances found in plants. Even though herbal remedies are “natural,” they are not always safe. Plants sometimes have chemicals that can hurt the body.
- **Homeopathy** – People who use homeopathy take small amounts of substances that would make them sick if they took them in large amounts.
- **Mind-body techniques** – Examples of mind-body techniques include hypnosis and guided imagery. These techniques are supposed to calm you and help you change the way you think about your symptoms.
- **Massage therapy** – During massage therapy the person giving the massage rubs, kneads, and presses on the other person’s body.
- **Reiki and other “energy therapies”** – People who believe in energy therapies such as Reiki think that energy flows throughout the body. During Reiki treatment, the person giving the treatment “directs” his or her energy toward the person having treatment.
- **Special diets** – People with cancer and other health problems sometimes hear that their condition could improve if they ate a special diet. These diets might contain no meat, or require people to take special supplements.

**Is it safe to try alternative medicine?** — Many forms of alternative medicine are safe. And some even work. But some forms — especially those that involve taking supplements or herbal drugs — might not be safe.

If you use or are thinking about using alternative medicine, mention it to your doctor or nurse. He or she can tell you if there are any risks involved with the alternative medicine you have in mind.

It is important to talk with your doctor or nurse, because:

- Some herbal medicines, such as the herbal antidepressant Saint John’s Wort, can interact with prescription medicines and keep them from working.
- Some herbal medicines are toxic and dangerous. For example, kava kava (which people take for anxiety) can damage the liver and might not be safe.
- Some special diets cause people to lose weight very quickly. And that can cause health problems. Plus, special diets can be very expensive even though they do not help people get better.

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