

The Role of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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According to Dr. Andrew Weil, Director of the Integrative Medicine program at the University of Arizona, “The integrative approach is based on a physician/patient partnership within which conventional and alternative modalities are used to stimulate the body’s natural healing potential. It neither rejects conventional medicine nor uncritically accepts alternative practices.” Physicians who use the integrative approach work from a model of health and often focus on prevention. In contrast, the conventional disease model typically attempts to treat the disease once symptoms become evident. Practitioners who use the integrative approach also consider nutritional and lifestyle influences on health and illness and offer natural treatments in addition to drugs and surgery. Integrative medicine selects from or combines the best of conventional medicine and complementary and alternative medicine.

Treatment Modalities Defined

The terms “conventional,” “complementary,” and “alternative” can be difficult to define. In fact, these labels are relative and in some cases vary depending upon context. While there is some debate about the exact meaning of each term, they are defined as follows for the purposes of this discussion:

- **Conventional treatment** is what physicians deem to be the “standard of care” for a particular condition, either because the treatment has been studied scientifically and found to be safe and effective, or because there is consensus that the treatment works.
- **Complementary medicine** refers to interventions used *together with* conventional medicine. An example of a complementary therapy is the use of aromatherapy. The scent of essential oils from flowers, herbs, and trees when inhaled are thought to promote health and well-being and lessen a patient's discomfort following surgery.
- **Alternative medicine** is used *in place of* conventional medicine. An example of an alternative therapy is the use of a special diet to treat cancer instead of the surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy that has been recommended by a conventional doctor.

To help you understand how each term might apply to the treatment of Parkinson's disease, consider this example: Carbidopa/levodopa is a *conventional* drug treatment for Parkinson's that has been extensively studied and is routinely used by physicians. Acupuncture would be considered a *complementary* therapy if used in addition to the carbidopa/levodopa. Acupuncture would be considered an *alternative* therapy if used *instead* of carbidopa/levodopa or another first-line medication.

On a practical level, conventional medical treatment is more likely to be covered by insurance than a complementary or alternative therapy. However, more insurance companies are recognizing the value of acupuncture and massage therapy and providing limited coverage for these services. Contact your insurance carrier to determine your benefits.

The Benefits of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Patients often turn to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) if they are searching for more information about proper diet, exercise, and stress management. Others may turn to CAM to help them address some of the secondary symptoms of PD such as constipation or fatigue. These secondary symptoms can be just as troubling, or even more troubling, than the motor symptoms. Although the vast majority of people with Parkinson's benefit from antiparkinson medication, some may experience only partial relief or are bothered by side effects. Many individuals, particularly those diagnosed young, are interested in minimizing the amount of medication they take in order to delay possible long-term side effects like dyskinesia (involuntary movements). For these and other reasons, a growing number of individuals, faced with years of living with Parkinson's disease, seek out information regarding alternative or complementary therapies or visit practitioners in these specialty areas.

Types of Therapy

The following list includes examples of the multiple dimensions of therapies available within the discipline of CAM.

Biologically Based Therapies

- **Orthomolecular and megavitamin therapy** involve the adjustment of concentrations of molecules normally present in the body (e.g., vitamins, minerals, amino acids, hormones, and metabolic intermediates) for the

prevention and treatment of disease. Coenzyme Q 10 and omega-3 fatty acid-rich fish oils are examples of supplements in this category used by patients with PD.

- **Phytomedicine** is often called herbal or botanical medicine and refers to the therapeutic ingestion of plants. Herbal medicine dates back at least 5000 years and has been used by all races, religions, and cultures throughout the world.

Energy Medicine

- **Reiki** is a Japanese-derived healing modality in which a healing effect is induced by “life force” energy wherever the patient needs it most. The Reiki practitioner lightly applies hands on a clothed patient and channels healing energy as a general or localized treatment.

Manipulative and Body-Based Practices

- **Aromatherapy** uses the aromatic oils of plants to improve and maintain well-being. More than three hundred different oils are produced from flowers, leaves, stems, and roots. The action of aromatherapy depends on the link between smell and memories. Massage and penetration of the oils into the body may also have a direct effect.
- **Electric stimulation** involves the application of mild electric shocks to the skin. Chiropractors, massage therapists, and other practitioners of body work use this therapy to help relieve pain.
- **Massage therapy** is a common therapeutic treatment where manual rubbing, stroking, tapping, and kneading the body (either a particular area or the whole body) is performed for the purpose of treating physical and emotional disorders, increasing blood flow, reducing pain, promoting relaxation, releasing muscle tension, and enhancing general health and well-being.

Mind-Body Medicine

- **Biofeedback** involves the use of instrumentation to monitor, amplify, and report physiologic data for therapeutic purposes. The main objective of biofeedback is to change or regulate a physical process for better health, such as lowering one's heart rate with controlled breathing and guided visualization.

- **Relaxation techniques** can be helpful in reducing stress levels and include techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing. More advanced techniques include hypnosis, guided imagery, and meditation.

Whole Medical Systems

- **Ayurveda** is Sanskrit for “life knowledge,” and it is one of the oldest known systems of healing. Ayurveda approaches health as the balance of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Treatments include yoga, meditation, purification regimens, dietary changes, and herbal remedies.
- **Oriental Medicine** is an ancient system of diagnosis and treatment that corrects imbalances in Qi, or vital energy, with acupuncture, herbs, massage, nutrition, and movement. Acupuncture uses fine needles gently inserted at specific points along energy pathways of the body to encourage healing. Acupressure and low level laser acupuncture are non-invasive methods also aimed to balance one's Qi.
- **Naturopathy** is an alternative health system which emphasizes the body's ability to heal itself. Therapies include the use of natural foods and supplements, massage, hydrotherapy, homeopathy, and exercise that supports self-healing. Practitioners of naturopathy generally prefer to use treatment approaches they consider the most natural and least invasive instead of using drugs or surgery.

Finding the Right CAM Professional

A general rule of thumb is to avoid practitioners who claim to “cure” Parkinson's disease or require large, up-front payment for services. Also, beware of practitioners who advocate abruptly stopping or weaning prescription medications without a thorough, accurate explanation. Even with this information, consult your neurologist or primary care physician for an opinion, or seek the advice of an integrative medicine physician.

Evaluating the Safety and Usefulness of CAM Therapies

Reliable evidence for a number of complementary and alternative approaches will be forthcoming as more and more of these approaches are evaluated in carefully designed studies. At this time, there may be some complementary

treatment approaches you are willing to try without definitive proof, such as massage or tai chi. Other techniques or procedures, especially more invasive or experimental ones, should be supported by a strong base of evidence before they are utilized.

One of the best sources of information on CAM therapies is the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). Congress mandated the establishment of the Office of Alternative Medicine in 1998 to facilitate research that would help determine the safety and efficacy of alternative medicine modalities. NCCAM is one of the 27 institutes and centers that make up the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The Center funds research, provides grants to train researchers, and shares its findings about CAM therapies with medical professionals and the public through its information clearinghouse, fact sheets, Distinguished Lecture Series, continuing medical education programs, and publication databases.

Alternative therapies that have the potential to benefit people with Parkinson's must also be evaluated for their potential to do harm. *Natural* does not necessarily mean *safe*. Keep in mind that a truly effective CAM therapy usually takes a significant investment of time and effort to notice a benefit. Sensible CAM therapies combined with conventional medicine therapies should maximize the potential benefits of both treatments and should be discussed with your neurologist or primary care physician. This is especially true if you choose to use supplements or herbs in a complementary or alternative manner. Always inform your physician of any supplements or herbs you are thinking of using or are already taking since some herbs can interfere with conventional drug treatments.

The most successful patients with Parkinson's disease are typically those who are the most well-informed and have a balanced and realistic view of what conventional medications and alternatives can currently provide, as well as an understanding of their limitations and side effects. Patients should proceed with open-minded skepticism regarding CAM therapies. Complementary and alternative therapies are typically not used in isolation, and traditional medicines are usually necessary at some point. With proper medical guidance, the true integration of conventional therapies with CAM may help reduce or delay the effects of Parkinson's, as well as provide a greater sense of one's personal control over the disease.