



## National MS Society Information Sourcebook

[www.nationalmssociety.org/sourcebook](http://www.nationalmssociety.org/sourcebook)

### Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Complementary and alternative medicine includes everything from exercise and diet to food supplements, stress management strategies, and lifestyle changes. These therapies come from many different disciplines and traditions—yoga, hypnosis, guided imagery, relaxation techniques, traditional herbal healing, Chinese medicine, macrobiotics, naturopathy, and many others. They are referred to as *complementary* when they are used in conjunction with conventional medical interventions, and *alternative* when they are used instead of conventional treatments.

#### **Controlled Clinical Trials Evaluate the Safety and Effectiveness of Conventional Medical Interventions**

Many conventional treatments have been proven safe and effective in clinical trials. Most clinical trials divide participants into two groups. One group gets the experimental treatment; the other gets a placebo—an inactive substance—or a standard treatment that has already been proven to be safe and effective. Most reliable clinical trials are *blinded*, meaning that neither patients nor researchers know who is receiving which treatment.

This kind of controlled study allows researchers to separate the response to the treatment being tested from any response generated by the “placebo effect”. This term refers to benefits caused by a patient’s or a researcher’s expectations about a treatment, rather than by the treatment itself.

Clinical trials are particularly important in establishing the safety and effectiveness of new treatments for MS because MS is characterized by so many spontaneous remissions. Without controlled trials, it is impossible to determine whether changes in a person’s symptoms or disease course are related to the actions of the drug he or she is taking, or of spontaneous changes in the disease.

#### **Alternative Therapy Claims Lack Documentation**

Even when conventional medical practices have never undergone clinical trials, health professionals are aware of clinical experience and health risks and communicate this information with people using that particular treatment. Most people, however, have little or no idea of the risks they are taking when they use a complementary or alternative therapy. There is little published documentation to substantiate claims, and what is available may not be reliable.

Despite this lack of scientific rationale, CAM appeals to a growing number of Americans. Recent studies indicate that about 75% of people with MS use some form of CAM. Alternative medicine is now a \$15 billion a year industry.

Many people try alternative medicine because they believe that anything sold without a prescription is harmless. However, food supplements and other forms of CAM are not regulated in the United States in the same way as prescription medications. Therefore, there is no way to know that the products being sold are safe or effective, or, in the case of supplements, that they are even accurately labeled. In fact, some alternative therapies are painful and produce serious side effects. In recent years, a number of food supplements proved so harmful that they had to be taken off the market. So there can be plenty to lose—including hope, health, money, and in some cases, lives.

### **Common Sense Guidelines to Follow**

People who are considering using an alternative therapy should ask the following questions:

- What does the treatment involve?
- How and why is it supposed to work?
- How effective is it?
- What are the risks?
- How much does it cost?

The answers to these questions can help a person considering an alternative therapy to weigh the risks against the benefits. Those who decide to go ahead with alternative therapy should use common sense, as outlined below:

- **Keep your physician informed.** A physician caring for a person with MS needs to know all therapies that are being tried. The physician can also alert a person with MS to possible side effects or drug interactions.
- **Don't abandon conventional therapy.** Only use alternative therapy in addition to, not in place of, conventional therapy.
- **Document the experience.** Keep a detailed log of what was done or taken and any changes noted.

For information on treatments for MS, call the National MS Society at 1-800-FIGHT MS (1-800-344-4867).

.....

## See also...

### Sourcebook

- Acupuncture
- Clinical Trials
- Linoleic Acid (Evening Primrose Oil)
- Marijuana
- Vitamin Therapy

### Society Web Resources

- Spotlight: Complementary & Alternative Medicine (CAM)  
[www.nationalmssociety.org/CAM](http://www.nationalmssociety.org/CAM)
- Healthy Living with MS  
[www.nationalmssociety.org/Healthy](http://www.nationalmssociety.org/Healthy)
- Treatments  
[www.nationalmssociety.org/Treatments](http://www.nationalmssociety.org/Treatments)

### Clinical Bulletin for Healthcare Professionals

- Complementary and Alternative Medicine in MS  
[www.nationalmssociety.org/ClinicalBulletins](http://www.nationalmssociety.org/ClinicalBulletins)

### Book

Bowling A. *Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis*. New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2001.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information about multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion, but do not represent individual therapeutic recommendations or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult your personal physician.

To contact your chapter, call **1-800-FIGHT-MS** (1-800-344-4867) or visit the National MS Society web site: [www.nationalmssociety.org](http://www.nationalmssociety.org).

© 2005 The National Multiple Sclerosis Society. All rights reserved.  
Last updated October 2005