

## Fact Sheet 4: Assessing Complementary & Alternative Treatments

*THIS FACT SHEET discusses the difference between conventional, complementary and alternative treatment. It suggests how to assess these treatments and their practitioners, and offers a range of issues to consider and questions to ask.*

There are many practitioners offering therapies and treatments outside mainstream medicine and Australians are turning more and more to these approaches.

You and the person you care for are likely to receive lots of advice and information about treatments and remedies from many sources – doctors, friends, family, pamphlets, workmates, magazines, newspapers, books, shops, the radio and the internet. Some of it will be sound and useful. Some may be confusing or misleading. We offer the following information as a guideline to help sort through your options and make the best choices.

### ***What are Complementary and Alternative Treatments?***

Broadly speaking, in our society there are three main types of treatment and therapy available:

- Conventional treatment
- Complementary treatment
- Alternative treatment

You may hear a variety of terms used to describe treatments: “mainstream” and “conventional” refer to the same approach, while the words “complementary” and “alternative” are often used interchangeably for treatments, when they are not.

“Holistic” and “integrated” are also popular terms. Generally speaking, these terms most often refer to complementary approaches that take into account the whole person and influencing factors on their health such as diet, their emotional, mental and spiritual states,

and the environment in which they live and work.

**Conventional treatments:** These are the basis of the Western health system. Mainstream treatments are generally based on scientific evidence and the benefits and side effects are usually well known. In the case of acquired brain injury, your family member might undergo conventional treatments such as surgery, medication, physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy or psychotherapy.

**Complementary treatments:** These are used in conjunction with conventional medicine and are generally based on more natural methods. These treatments are often well established in other cultures that have successfully used them for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Complementary treatments might include traditional Chinese medicine, naturopathy, homeopathy, herbalism, acupuncture, chiropractic, kinesiology, Reiki, reflexology and iridology. They are offered by non-medical practitioners.

In addition, complementary therapies might include meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi, dance, other forms of exercise, spiritual practices, relaxation techniques, music, nutrition, aromatherapy, hypnotherapy and certain activities, such as gardening and art and crafts.

**Alternative treatment:** Alternative treatments are used instead of conventional treatments. These tend to be approaches about which little or nothing is known from a scientific perspective.

People who use alternative therapies have generally done their own research by speaking to the practitioners and their clients and reading whatever information is available about the approach. Examples of treatments include ozone therapy, taking large doses of vitamin supplements, taking special vegetable or fruit juices or a radical approach to diet and nutrition.

## ***Issues to Consider***

Complementary therapies can make a wonderful difference to a person's quality of life and overall well being and many are proven in these capacities.

Alternative approaches can also be useful and some may claim to offer anything from dramatic improvements in a condition (or for particular groups of patients) to cures, although there may be no scientific evidence to support this.

With conventional, complementary and alternative approaches, miracles do happen – so do mistakes. People may use one or a combination of these approaches with varying levels of success. It is important to make well informed choices. This is your body, your health, your life and how you choose to handle it is your responsibility.

When we are ill or challenged however, it can be very difficult to maintain clear thinking and motivation. Researching your options and settling on treatment and therapy that *feels right for you* is part of the journey – do enlist trusted family and friends to help you gather all the information you need.

**Check qualifications:** It helps to know what level of training your practitioner has had and how much experience they have had treating people. Also, check to see whether they belong to a professional association that has a charter or code of ethics and ask how many practitioners belong to that organisation. Remember, the title “doctor” does not necessarily mean they are a medical doctor.

**Assess the environment:** Make sure you are comfortable with the practitioner's working environment. Does it appear hygienic, professional and well equipped for the task? Are any remedies or treatments used prepared in accordance with some standard of practice or quality assurance?

**Talk to your doctor:** If you decide to try other treatments while continuing mainstream approaches, it is very important to keep your doctor and/or specialists informed. New treatments may interfere with conventional treatments or even exacerbate their effects, as can happen when taking large amounts of

vitamin supplements, for example. Your doctor or specialist may also have additional information on the proposed treatment and be aware of other benefits, possible side effects or its potential to cause harm. The better informed you are of the proposed treatment, the better able your doctor is to advise you.

Some people find it difficult to discuss non-mainstream treatments with their doctor. If you feel uncomfortable, try this approach:

"I keep hearing about the \_\_\_\_\_ treatment. Can you tell me why some doctors don't accept it? Why do some people think it works and others believe it doesn't? Can it help me at all?"

You have simply asked for information. You have not attacked the treatment you are receiving or the people treating you.

**Costs:** Some therapies and treatments can be very expensive at a time when the illness may already be placing you under financial strain. Ask if there will be extra costs, such as further courses of treatment, living-away-from-home costs, travel, further tests etc.

**Independent sources of information:** When assessing complementary or alternative therapies it is best to consult a range of people. It may be possible to speak with some of the practitioner's clients, for example, but try to find others who have considered the treatment who are not nominated by the practitioner.

For example, condition-specific support groups (either local or internet-based) can be excellent sources of well researched information. Ask whether anyone has assessed the approach and their reasons for going with it or deciding against it. Your condition-specific support organisation may have further information, too. Or you may feel more comfortable asking a trusted specialist for advice.

**A biased approach:** The health industry provides vital services but like any other, it also exists to make a profit. Be aware that some practitioners you consult (conventional, complementary or alternative) may receive some kind of benefit from supporting a particular treatment or product associated with that treatment. As a result, you may not be offered the widest selection of treatments available.

## ***Questions to Ask***

How can this treatment maintain or improve my quality of life and general health?

What does the treatment involve?

Are there any known side-effects?

What is the cost and the duration of the treatment?

What evidence is there that it works?

Has the practitioner worked with others who have the same condition as you (e.g. Parkinson's or Multiple Sclerosis)? Can you speak to any of them?

How many people has it helped? (Claims can be made on the experience of one or two people.)

Is there any information on the number of people who used the remedy but received no benefit from it?

Will it affect mainstream treatments?

If the treatment is only offered overseas, can it be brought back through Australian Customs?

If the person uses the title "Doctor" or "Professor", do the titles refer to medical qualifications recognised in Australia?

## ***Resources***

The disability division of the Department of Human Services has a website that contains a range of very useful health information fact sheets on complementary therapies.

Visit [www.disability.vic.gov.au](http://www.disability.vic.gov.au)