

# Considering Interventions from Complementary & Alternative Medicine

## Section on Pediatrics FACT SHEET



**PEDIATRICS**

AMERICAN PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION

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## What Is Complementary & Alternative Medicine?

Alternative medicine includes a group of diverse healing and preventative practices that are not part of traditional or conventional medicine. Alternative medicine is not widely taught nor frequently used by medical doctors or other health care providers, including physical therapists. When used with conventional medicine, alternative practices are called "complementary." The boundaries of alternative medicine are constantly changing as different types of care gather more evidence, become more accepted by physicians and other health care providers, and are more often requested by patients.

Respectful, family-centered care of children requires mutual participation of physical therapist and parent when making decisions about alternative interventions. Both should seek information and share with each other, with the common goal of the best possible outcome for the child. The questions and suggestions that follow are intended to facilitate decision-making about alternative and complementary interventions.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) classifies alternative interventions into five categories:

- Alternative medical systems, built upon systems of theory and practice (eg, homeopathic and naturopathic medicine);
- Mind-body interventions, which enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily functions (eg, meditation or creative outlets);
- Biologically based therapies, which use substances found in nature (eg, herbs);
- Manipulative and body based methods (eg, chiropractic); and
- Energy therapies, which involve use of energy fields (eg, Reiki and unconventional use of electromagnetic fields).

## What Is the Evidence for the Effectiveness of Alternative Intervention?

Conventional medicine emphasizes evidence-based practice, which is the use of the best available knowledge and research to guide decision-making. The evidence from research should be interpreted in the context of the specific child, his or her daily routines, and his or her family. Anecdotes about interventions or testimonials are not considered to be adequate for decision-making, according to evidence-based practice. The highest level of evidence involves controlled trials, taking the placebo effect into account.

- Consult with the child's primary health care provider and other specialists for information on the alternative practice in question. If the child's primary care physician is unsupportive or uninformed about alternative medicine, share what you know and try to be clear and objective about why you are pursuing the alternative or complementary practice.
- Search for evidence on the practice or intervention. NCCAM has a useful Web site ([www.nccam.nih.gov](http://www.nccam.nih.gov)), and the NCCAM Clearinghouse can be accessed by phone (888/644-6226). The staff is available to assist you with your search of medical and scientific literature. Also, search at your local or medical library; the reference librarian can help you research your topic. Another useful resource is PubMed ([www.pubmed.gov](http://www.pubmed.gov)), the NIH database for medical literature. A bibliographic database of journals covering alternative and complementary therapies is accessible through PubMed.

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- Search for and read consensus documents and meta-analyses on the topic, if available.
- Consult with agencies, such as United Cerebral Palsy, for links to information about alternative medicine.
- Search for the alternative intervention in “Hooked on Evidence” ([www.apta.org/hookedonevidence/index.cfm](http://www.apta.org/hookedonevidence/index.cfm)); the evidence-based review of topics by the American Physical Therapy Association.
- Be wary of interventions purported to help a variety of conditions or that claim dramatic cures.

### Is the Intervention Safe?

Potential problems may be difficult to identify with many alternative interventions. For example, herbal medicines are not tested or regulated by the FDA, so potency can be inconsistent and the lowest effective dose for children may not be determined.

- Talk to the child’s primary health care provider to find out if the alternative practice has the potential to be dangerous. Areas of concern include allergies, the child’s behavioral or biological reactions to new things, musculoskeletal impairments, development of skeletal structures and functions, behavioral issues, and financial stresses in the family.
- Remember that vitamins and herbs can be potent chemicals and may interact with current medications. There may be effects of abrupt withdrawal. “Natural” doesn’t necessarily mean safe!
- Consider how the time and energy committed to the alternative intervention may interfere with the child’s already-established daily routines and interventions.
- Information about safety may be obtained through the sources suggested above. Also, check with the Federal Trade Commission ([www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)) to see if there are fraudulent claims or consumer alerts.
- Try to speak with other parents who have used the intervention to discuss the pros and cons of their perspective.

### How Can I Evaluate the Qualifications of Alternative Practitioners?

In conventional medicine, medical doctors and other health care providers have licensing boards that standardize practice and qualifications. Professional organizations also set practice and ethical standards. This is not necessarily true of alternative practitioners.

- Inquire about the education and official credentials the practitioner has. Some states license alternative practitioners, such as acupuncturists or massage therapists. There may not be licensure for other practitioners. Ask whether there is a brochure or Web site to tell you more about the practice.
- Find out if there’s a professional organization for the type of practitioner that you’re considering and contact it to obtain information about standards of care. Search for professional organizations on the Internet or by using directories in the library. The Directory of Information Resources Online ([dirline.nlm.nih.gov](http://dirline.nlm.nih.gov)) lists locations and information about a variety of health organizations.
- Ask the child’s primary care practitioner if he or she knows of a reputable practitioner of the intervention you are investigating. Seek recommendations from other parents or someone that you trust.
- Determine if the practitioner’s claims about the intervention are realistic and if the practitioner is open to discuss limitations and advantages.
- Evaluate the practitioner’s knowledge about your child’s medical or developmental condition.

### How Will I Know if the Intervention Is Helping?

Change may occur at many different levels, including: change in participation in daily routines at school, at home, or in the community and change in body structures and functions, such as flexibility of joints and selective attention.

- Physical therapists and parents need to collaborate to develop objective ways to measure change over time. Determine the characteristics or behaviors of the child that are targeted by the intervention and the expected timing for change.

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- Physical therapists and parents should observe the effects of the intervention and discuss them. The effects of the intervention and its withdrawal may be systematically observed by providing the intervention for a specified time, safely withdrawing the intervention, then repeating the sequence.

## Resources

Adams RC, Snyder P. Treatments for cerebral palsy: making choices of intervention from an expanding menu of options. *Infants and Young Children*. 1998;10(4):1-22.

Davis CM. *Complementary Therapies in Rehabilitation*. Slack Inc; 2004.

Dowshen S, Hassink S. Alternative Medicine and Your Child, 1/25/03. [www.kidshealth.org/parent/general/sick/alternative\\_medicine.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/general/sick/alternative_medicine.html).

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Harris SR. How should treatments be critiqued for scientific merit? *Physical Therapy*. 1996;76(2):175-181.

Nickel RE. Controversial therapies for young children with developmental disabilities. *Infants and Young Children*. 1996;8(4):29-40.

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Sandler AD, Cooley WC, Hirsch D. Counseling families who choose complementary and alternative medicine for their child with chronic illness or disability. *Pediatrics*. 2001;107(3):598-601.

## For More Information

If you have additional questions, would like to order additional copies of this fact sheet, or would like to join the Section on Pediatrics, please contact the Executive Office of the Section on Pediatrics of the American Physical Therapy Association at:

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