



What to Expect from Alternative Medicine

How do alternative (or integrative) medicine practitioners view health and healing?

The philosophical cornerstones of integrative medicine are:

- **Physical Illness** — Illness is a reflection of emotional/spiritual disharmony rather than a separate disease. Chronic stress, a lack of balance, and an individual's ability to cope contribute significantly to illness.
- **Prevention** The primary responsibility of medicine is to prevent disease. Many illnesses that kill and disable people prematurely are preventable if people make timely and appropriate lifestyle changes.
- **Healing** Each person's body has a unique potential for healing; the best medicine works to activate innate, natural healing mechanisms. Healthcare practitioners have a responsibility to patients and themselves to be aware of all modalities available for prevention and healing. Patients have a responsibility to be an active partner in all stages of treatment.
- **Priorities** Whenever possible, one should try simple, safe, cost-effective treatments before invasive, complicated, expensive, and risky ones.
- **Science** Good medicine must be consistent with good science, especially with new paradigms based on uncertainty and holistic interconnectedness.
- **Wholeness** This concept involves NO dogma or religious understanding; it is an expression of the energetic self integrated with the physical body. When our behaviors are aligned with our authentic inner motivations, we have integrity. We become an expression of the integrated self all parts working in concert.

What are the dangers of using alternative medicine techniques?

The most frightening aspects of alternative medicine are patients' lack of communication about their choices with traditional medicine providers and the respect those providers demonstrate for the alternative choices patients make. Some alternative therapies *MAY* enhance or interfere with medical therapies prescribed by a physician, making this lack of communication a real threat to a patient's health. Additionally, many patients rightfully assume that their physicians will negatively respond to the use of other modalities, keeping them from seeking advice on selecting safe, trained professionals who practice alternative methods. In both cases, the patient suffers a serious injustice.

For example, in a recent study in Atlanta, 74 percent of patients reported utilizing at least one form of alternative therapy as part of their healing process. However, only 18 percent of those patients ever told their physician about using any other form of health care. When questioned, they stated that they withheld this information because they believed that either the practitioner would have no knowledge of the modality or the physician would ridicule their choices.

The good news is that consumer demand is beginning to spark new interest in integrating alternative and traditional medicine. In 50 of the 135 U.S. medical schools, courses have been added that cover acupuncture, homeopathy, nutrition, massage, and prayer. The National Institutes of Health now recommend that all medical and nursing students be exposed to alternative theories and techniques.

Did You Know?

Until the 17th century, required training for a medical degree included eight years of study in Astronomy and Astrology. This requirement stemmed from the belief that successfully treating the body required examining the state of mind to pinpoint the soul's place in the universe.

What standards exist for training alternative medicine practitioners?

There is no set standard for teaching alternative medicine; each school designs its own courses. Anyone who wants to offer a course can do so with virtually no quality control oversight. There's everything from brown-bag lectures to eight-week seminar courses surveying the field. Here are two examples of different programs now available to medical students:

- **University of Arizona College of Medicine** Two-year fellowship directed by Andrew Weil, a Harvard medical school grad and author of the best seller [Spontaneous Healing](#).
- **University of Virginia** An elective course for advanced surgical students in which they spend 30 hours a week experimenting with unconventional treatments.

Twelve states now recognize and license graduates of four-year, accredited naturopathic medical schools, which emphasize nutrition and prevention. These states are Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, and Washington. In addition, some modalities, such as massage and counseling, are subject to state licensing throughout the U.S.

As with all healthcare decisions, selecting an alternative medicine modality and provider is a serious endeavor. To be a better consumer of these services, review the guidelines in "[How to be a Better Consumer of Alternative Medicine Services](#)."