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Alternative and Complementary Therapies for MS

The term alternative therapy, in general, is used to describe any medical treatment or intervention that has not been scientifically documented or identified as safe or effective for a specific condition.

Alternative therapy encompasses a variety of disciplines that range from diet and exercise to mental conditioning to lifestyle changes. Examples include acupuncture, yoga, aromatherapy, relaxation, herbal remedies, and massage.

Complementary therapies are alternative therapies used in addition to traditional treatments. For example, you may have weekly massages to complement your drug treatment.

What is recommended for MS?

- Positive attitude.** Having a positive outlook cannot cure MS, but it can reduce your stress and help you feel better.
- Exercise.** Exercises such as tai chi and yoga can lower your stress, help you to be more relaxed, and increase your energy, balance, and flexibility. As with any exercise program, check with your doctor before getting started.
- Diet.** It is important for people with MS to follow a healthy, well-balanced diet. Ask your doctor what diet is right for you.

What are some alternative/complementary therapy options for MS?

- Massage.** Many people with MS receive regular massage therapy to help relax and reduce stress and depression, which can exacerbate the disease. There is no evidence that massage changes the course of the disease. It is usually safe for people with MS to receive a massage, but if you have bone-thinning osteoporosis (usually as a result of your treatments), massage may be dangerous. Talk to your doctor first.
- Acupuncture.** Some people with MS report that acupuncture provides some relief of symptoms such as pain, muscle spasms, or bladder control problems. There have been no scientific studies to confirm this or to document that acupuncture is safe for people with MS. Also, keep in mind that there are always risks when a procedure involves puncturing the body with needles, as is done with acupuncture. The main risk is infection. Unless sterile techniques are used, acupuncture could transmit hepatitis or HIV.
- Evening primrose oil (linoleic acid).** Linoleic acid is also found in sunflower seeds and safflower oil. There is some evidence that taking an oral supplement of linoleic acid may slightly improve MS symptoms.
- Diet.** It is important for people with MS to maintain a healthy, well-balanced diet to keep them as healthy as possible. Discuss any dietary concerns you may have with your doctor.
- Marijuana.** The use of marijuana to treat any illness remains highly controversial. Some people with MS claim that

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smoking marijuana helps relieve spasticity and other MS-related symptoms. However, there is little evidence to date that marijuana really works. Research is ongoing to answer this important question. Until more is known, doctors do not recommend the use of marijuana to treat MS, as the drug is associated with serious long-term side effects such as heart attack or memory loss.

How can I tell which therapies are worth taking?

Alternative therapy can be helpful in many cases, but some treatments can be ineffective, costly, and even dangerous. The best way to evaluate your options is to become educated. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the treatment?
- What does it involve?
- How does it work?
- Why does it work?
- Are there any risks?
- What are the side effects?
- Is it effective? (Ask for evidence or proof.)
- How much does it cost?

Once you answer these questions, weigh your options and decide whether the benefits outweigh the risks.

If you do decide to try an alternative or complementary treatment, make sure your health and pocketbook are protected. Here are some tips.

- **Do not take the claim at face value.** Contact reliable organizations and discuss the therapy. Talk to others in a support group, your family, and friends. Although they may not always be supportive, they can help you make an educated, objective decision.
- **Discuss the therapy with your doctor.** Make sure your doctor knows what therapy you are considering so he or she can discuss possible interactions or side effects with your current treatment. Your doctor can also provide you with information on other patients who may have tried the same therapy.
- **Talk to others who have used the therapy.** Ask them what their experiences have been. Do not go solely on testimonials from the care provider or product manufacturer. Track down your own references and get their opinions.
- **Research the provider's background.** Contact the Better Business Bureau and thoroughly research the background of the therapy provider. Determine how long they have been providing this therapy, what credentials they have, and what their philosophy of treatment is.
- **Avoid providers who refuse or are reluctant to work with your doctor.** Be sure that the provider is willing to refer patients to a conventional doctor when necessary.
- **Make sure you know the total cost of the treatment upfront.** Most of these therapies are not covered by your insurance.

What red flags should I watch out for?


- **Promotion:** Be cautious if products or providers are promoted through telemarketers, direct mailings, infomercials, ads disguised as valid news articles, or ads in the back of magazines.
- **Big claims:** If a provider or product claims to be a "cure" for MS or makes other outrageous claims, be cautious.
- **Source:** Be wary if the product is being offered through one manufacturer only.
- **Ingredients:** Make sure all of the active ingredients are listed. Do not trust "secret formulas."
- **Testimonials:** Testimonials are given only by those who are satisfied with the product, so beware, especially if the term "paid endorsement" is used. Also, be cautious if testimonials are given by people who are listed only by initials, locations, or first names.

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