

## What's The Difference Between Complementary and Alternative Health Approaches?

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**Received:** January 26, 2016; **Published:** January 27, 2016

### Integrative Health Incorporates Complementary Approaches into Mainstream Healthcare

Is this a vortex in which we healthcare professionals should immerse? Which is best to help our patients? It is a sometimes perplexing thought. Why? As healthcare professional I suspect we do not know the differences or similarities and value of each in a particular situation. Only after considerable research did I understand the subtle differences of these supportive approaches to the larger class know as *integrative health*. There are many definitions of *integrative* healthcare, but all involve bringing *conventional* and *complementary* approaches together in *healthcare* in a variety of situations, including pain management for military personnel and veterans, relief of symptoms in cancer patients and survivors and programs to promote health behaviors. If a non-mainstream practice is used together with *conventional* medicine, it is considered *complementary*. If a non-mainstream practice is used in place of conventional medicine, it is considered *alternative*. Many Americans (30 percent of adults and 12% of children) use these health care approaches developed outside of mainstream Western or conventional medicine.

### Complementary Product Health Approaches

Most complementary health approaches fall into one of two subgroups: *natural products* or *mind and body practices*. Not surprisingly the natural products group includes a variety of products such as *herbs* or *botanicals*, *vitamins* and *minerals* and *probiotics*. Most of these are sold as *dietary supplements*. Even as late as 2012, the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (part of NIH) found 17.7 percent of American adults had used a dietary supplement other than vitamins and minerals in the past year. These natural products were the most popular complementary health approaches in the survey. The most commonly used natural product was fish oil.

Other common complementary health approaches among adults in 2012 in decreasing percent included *Deep Breathing*, *Yoga*, *Tai Chi* or *Qi Gong*, *Chiropractic* or *Osteopathic Manipulation*, *Meditation*, *Massage*, *Special Diets*, *Homeopathy*, *Progressive Relaxation*, *Acupuncture*, *Guided Imagery* and *Various Movement Therapies* (*Feldenkrais*, *Alexander*, *Pilates*, *Rolfing* and *Trager*). The amount of research on mind and body approaches varies widely depending upon the practice. Researchers have done many studies on acupuncture, yoga, spinal manipulation and meditation. Other practices have had fewer publications appear in the literature.

### Other Complementary Health Approaches

Some approaches currently in use do not neatly fit into either of the natural products or mind and body practices grouping. Examples of these are *Traditional Healers*, *Ayurvedic Medicine*, *Traditional Chinese medicine*, *Homeopathy* and *Naturopathy*. In international circles many of these complementary health approaches are more prevalent than in the United States. Perhaps for this reason the World Health Organization welcomes research in these areas.

Which is it? *Complementary*, *Alternative* or *Integrated Health*?

**Volume 1 Issue 1 January 2016**

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