



plain and simple facts

# COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES



## Things to Consider Before Starting Complementary Therapies

“Complementary therapy” refers to a broad group of natural and spiritual healing methods and approaches that are different from conventional Western medicine (or pharmaceutical medicine). Many of these healing methods have been used for centuries in many different cultures.

Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, a wide variety of complementary therapies has been used by people with HIV for various purposes, including general health promotion, relief of symptoms and cure of certain ailments. These include Traditional Chinese Medicine, acupuncture, Ayurveda, aromatherapy, homeopathy, massage, meditation, naturopathy, Reiki, reflexology, yoga and many others.

### How is “Western medicine” different from “complementary therapy”?

- Western medicine tends to focus on the external factors that cause the symptoms of the disease, while complementary therapy focuses on the balance of the body’s internal energies.
- Western medicine focuses on treating the diseases, while complementary therapy focuses on restoring balance between the physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of the person.
- In Western medicine, drugs and other forms of treatment are tested in clinical trials before they are approved for use. Many complementary therapy practices are not clinically tested but are learned from centuries of practice experience.

### What should I consider before using complementary therapies?

- **Learn about a treatment before you use it:**

Get information about the form of complementary therapy you are interested in using. You can get information from different complementary therapy professional associations, AIDS service organizations or the media. More importantly, talk to other people with HIV/AIDS who have used the treatment, learn about its advantages and disadvantages, risks and benefits, costs and results.

- **Find a knowledgeable and sensitive complementary therapist:**

Find out whether the kind of therapy you are interested in is regulated by a professional body or government. Check if your therapist has the necessary training and qualification to practice.

If the therapy you are using is not regulated, then it is even more important to research the experiences and results of other patients who have used the service. Make a list of questions you have regarding the therapy, its risks and benefits, length of treatment, costs and expected results, and ask your therapist to explain these to you at your first session.

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Just as many Western doctors are not experienced in treating HIV disease, many complementary therapists may also lack the expertise to treat HIV-related conditions and side effects. Find a therapist who has special training or experience working with people with HIV/AIDS.

- **Be clear and careful about the costs:**

Since many complementary therapies are not covered by public or private insurance, it is important to ask your therapist to give you a clear estimate of the costs involved in the treatments.

Sometimes your local AIDS service organization may have complementary therapists providing voluntary or reduced cost services to people with HIV/AIDS. Ask about these services at your local AIDS service organization.

- **Tell your caregivers about all the treatments you are using:**

Complementary therapies and Western medicine do not necessarily replace each other. In fact, often they support, or “complement,” each other.

It is important to tell both your Western medical care provider and complementary therapists about all the different kinds of treatments you are using. This will help them get a more complete picture of your treatment plan in order to maximize the benefits of the treatments and to prevent any harmful side effects or interactions between the treatments.

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### **Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.**



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