Cancer Council

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Understanding Complementary Therapies

A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends

For information & support, call **13 11 20**

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Note to reader
Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This booklet is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals, and you may wish to discuss issues raised in this booklet with them. All care is taken to ensure that the information in this booklet is accurate at the time of publication. Please note that information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this booklet.

Cancer Council
Cancer Council is Australia's peak non-government cancer control organisation. Through the 8 state and territory Cancer Councils, we provide a broad range of programs and services to help improve the quality of life of people living with cancer, their families and friends. Cancer Councils also invest heavily in research and prevention. To make a donation and help us beat cancer, visit cancer.org.au or call your local Cancer Council.

Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present.

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About this booklet

Complementary therapies are meant to be used alongside conventional treatments – the type of care you get from qualified doctors or at hospitals. For example, you may use meditation (a complementary therapy) while having chemotherapy (a conventional treatment).

This booklet includes information about different complementary therapies, but we cannot tell you which ones will be helpful for you. You need to talk to your doctors, pharmacists, and professionals qualified in the therapies before trying anything new. If there's no evidence about a therapy, you and your health care team should consider the possible benefits and any harm they might cause.

Alternative therapies are different to complementary therapies (see page 5). Cancer Council does not recommend that people use alternative therapies to treat cancer.

We hope this booklet helps you with what to ask your treatment team (see pages 63–64 for a question checklist). Words or terms that you may not know are explained in the glossary (see pages 65–70).

How this booklet was developed – This information was developed with help from a range of health professionals. It is based on international and Australian research on complementary therapies.[1–12]

If you or your family have any questions or concerns, call **Cancer Council 13 11 20**. We can send you more information and connect you with support services in your area. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website (see back cover).

Contents

Key to icons

Icons are used throughout this booklet to indicate:


More information


Alert


Tips

Is this Cancer Council booklet helpful? Please follow this QR code for a quick 3-minute survey, or call 13 11 20 to provide your feedback.

SCAN ME

How cancer is treated

Conventional medical treatments

Doctors treat cancer using proven medical treatments, including surgery, radiation therapy (radiotherapy) and drug therapies such as chemotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy. These are called conventional medical treatments and are used to remove cancer, slow or stop its growth and spread, or relieve symptoms.

Conventional medical treatments are based on scientific evidence. They are carefully researched to make sure they work and are safe. This is called evidence-based medicine. Before new treatments are used, they are first tested in laboratories and then with people in large studies. This is called a clinical trial (see pages 26–27).

How complementary therapies can help

Complementary therapies are used alongside conventional medicines – they may be seen to "complement" them. There is no evidence that complementary therapies can treat or cure the cancer itself.

Complementary therapies are said to focus on the whole person, not treating cancer. This is known as holistic care. They may help manage the physical and emotional impact of cancer, or the side effects of conventional cancer treatments.

Some complementary therapies have strong evidence of benefits, but some do not. Some are being, or have been, scientifically tested to see if they are safe for people with cancer, if they improve symptoms or side effects, and how they interact with conventional cancer treatments.

The difference between “complementary” and “alternative”

“Complementary” and “alternative” mean very different things, even though you may hear or see the terms used together, e.g. “complementary and alternative therapies”. Cancer Council does not recommend using alternative therapies to treat cancer.[1]

Complementary therapies

- widely used alongside conventional medical treatments
- help manage side effects of cancer or its treatment
- can continue to be used after treatment is completed
- may be scientifically researched to show they are generally safe and effective in improving the wellbeing of the person (some are, some are not)
- common complementary therapies that are used alongside conventional cancer treatments are included in this booklet

Alternative therapies

- used instead of conventional medical treatments
- often not scientifically tested, so there may be no evidence that they do what they claim
- may have been shown to be harmful to people with cancer or not to work
- may interact with other medicines or have unknown side effects – some may be serious or stop successful treatment of the cancer
- often expensive and not covered by Medicare or the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)

Some alternative therapies and medicines are promoted as cancer cures, and some alternative therapy practitioners may suggest stopping regular cancer treatment. If you are thinking about this, talk with your doctor and cancer care team first. Delaying conventional treatment to try an alternative therapy can let the cancer grow, making it harder to treat or leaving you too unwell to have treatment. It is important to first talk to your doctor about any and all complementary or alternative therapies you are thinking about trying (see pages 10–11).

Key questions

Q: Why do people use complementary therapies?

A: Many people in Australia use complementary therapies.[2] The reasons they use them include to:

- manage the symptoms and side effects of conventional cancer treatment, such as fatigue, nausea or pain
- help manage or relieve stress and anxiety
- feel more involved in their care and recovery
- have greater control over decisions about their body
- explore non-medical ways to improve wellbeing
- help strengthen the mind and body during treatment
- improve quality of life
- include traditional or cultural practices (see pages 56–57).

Q: What complementary therapies are available?

A: There are a wide range of complementary therapies grouped into different categories (see page 9). Some may be available at your cancer centre, hospital or from allied health professionals (such as psychologists, physiotherapists and exercise physiologists) you see. You can also book directly with a complementary therapy provider.

Many Australian cancer hospitals have wellbeing centres that offer complementary therapies with guidance from cancer experts. However, not all cancer centres have a wellbeing centre, and many people access complementary therapies in the community instead.

Reading the *Individual therapies* section (pages 34–59) may give you a general idea of what might interest you. See *Making informed decisions* (pages 21–27) for information about choosing a therapy, a practitioner and the costs involved. Hospital pharmacists can also provide advice on complementary therapies and how they might interact with other prescribed medicines.

Q: What does "integrative" mean?

A: Integrative oncology is an area of cancer care that focuses on the patient with evidence-based therapies. It uses mind and body practices, natural products, and lifestyle changes from different traditions alongside conventional cancer treatments. The aim is for the best health, quality of life, and treatment results no matter what the stage of cancer care. It empowers people to be part of their care before, during and beyond cancer treatment.

Some doctors, nurses or allied health professionals work in this way and may call themselves "integrative" – for example, integrative oncologist, integrative general practitioner (GP), or integrative naturopath.

The meaning of "integrative" can vary. Not everyone who uses the term may be a trained health professional or have the proper training in conventional medicine, nursing, allied health or complementary medicine. See page 22 for more about this.

Many palliative care services offer complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, massage, meditation, acupuncture and reflexology. These can increase a person's sense of control, decrease stress and anxiety, and improve mood.

Q: What are "whole medical systems"?

A: Many complementary therapies are part of what is called a whole medical system. In Australia, these include traditional healing practices (see pages 56–57), Ayurvedic medicine (see page 37), Chinese medicine (see pages 38–39), homeopathy (see page 43) and naturopathy (see page 49).

These systems are based on ideas such as:

- a healthy body needs to be balanced physically, emotionally and spiritually
- sickness can have many causes
- the body has a vital energy that reflects its level of wellbeing
- the body can help to heal itself
- health care is usually different for each person.

Q: Which complementary therapies work?

A: Cancer Council supports the use of complementary therapies that have been proven to be safe and effective in clinical trials or other scientific studies to help with symptoms or general wellbeing. If there is no strong evidence for a therapy, talk to your health care team about the possible benefits or harm it might cause.

Some therapies in this book have been scientifically shown to be safe and helpful for people with cancer. The health claims for other complementary therapies may not have strong evidence. However, personal stories (anecdotal reports) and, in some cases, a long history of use in traditional medicine suggest that some therapies may be useful for some people. Which therapies are safe and helpful can also vary depending on your general health, the cancer type and the treatments you may have.

What are the different categories of complementary therapies?

Mind-body practices

These are based on the belief that what we think and feel (e.g. stress, emotions) can affect our physical and mental wellbeing. And that physical symptoms can also affect mood and mental wellbeing.

They may also be called psychological techniques, emotional therapies or spiritual healing.

Body-based practices

These therapies work directly on the body and may be called bodywork or touch therapies.

Some therapies involve hands-on techniques such as massage or pressure. Others use movement to stretch and stimulate different parts of the body.

Energy therapies

These are based on the belief that the body has a life force or energy that can become blocked or unbalanced. Restoring flow is believed to support healing and wellbeing.

This energy is known as qi in Chinese medicine and prana in Ayurvedic medicine.

Therapies using herbs and plants

Herbal remedies or botanical medicines are used in many traditional medicine systems. They are made from the roots, leaves, berries and flowers of plants.

They may contain active ingredients that cause chemical changes in the body. They are usually taken by mouth or applied to the skin.

Should I tell my doctor about the therapies I use?

Many people with cancer who use complementary therapies don't tell their doctors, often because they worry their doctor will disapprove. The use of complementary therapies is growing, and many doctors are now more informed about them and supportive of their use. Some doctors, nurses and allied health professionals are trained in complementary therapies and can give you information about them. Some cancer treatment centres also offer complementary therapies.

You may think that because a therapy is "natural", available at the health food store or not a medicine (e.g. a massage), that you do not need to tell your doctors. But some therapies may not be safe or evidence-based. Some over-the-counter medicines, herbal supplements and vitamins that you buy from a pharmacy may cause reactions, drug-to-drug interaction, make side effects worse or interfere with the success of your conventional cancer treatment (see *Safety concerns*, page 12).

One study found that 25% of people having chemotherapy were using complementary therapy products that may cause harmful reactions. What they thought was helpful, may have been making them feel worse. This is why it's important to only use therapies that are safe for you, based on your treatment, cancer type and overall health.

Talk to your doctors

It is important to discuss your interest in complementary therapies with your GP, cancer doctors and nurses. Let them know about any therapies you are using or thinking about trying. Your pharmacist can also check for any interactions between complementary therapies and cancer treatments.

Talking to your cancer care team about complementary therapies allows them to:

- consider your safety and wellbeing
- check for and discuss possible side effects or interactions with conventional cancer treatments (including medicines)
- suggest complementary therapies that may help your symptoms
- refer you to a qualified therapist experienced in working with people with cancer.

Your surgeon, medical oncologist or radiation oncologist may discuss specific concerns, such as not using particular creams or medicines at certain times during your treatment. If you are taking herbs or nutritional supplements, your medical team may suggest that you stop taking these before, during or after particular treatments.

Talk to your complementary therapist too

It's important to tell all of your complementary therapists that you have cancer and what conventional medical treatments and medicines you are having.

Some therapies may need to be adjusted or avoided to prevent interactions with your conventional cancer treatment.

Ask your therapist what information they need from your cancer specialists. You can ask your doctors to write a letter outlining your treatments that you can give to any therapists you see. This can help to reduce the chance of side effects or drug interactions.

What is an integrative oncology doctor?

Integrative oncology doctors or physicians are licensed medical doctors with experience helping people with cancer. They work alongside your cancer care team.

Integrative oncology doctors combine standard cancer treatment (e.g. chemotherapy, surgery, radiation) with evidence-based integrative therapies, such as mind–body therapies, nutrition advice, exercise and acupuncture.

These doctors may help you manage treatment side effects, including fatigue, pain, nausea, sleep issues and anxiety, while supporting your emotional wellbeing and quality of life.

Integrative oncology doctors recommend therapies that are safe, supported by scientific research, and are coordinated with your cancer treatment. They can develop a personalised care plan, give reliable information, and help you take an active role in living as well as possible during and beyond cancer.

Safety concerns

Are complementary therapies safe?

Some complementary therapies have been found to be generally safe to use together with conventional cancer treatments and medicines. However, other complementary therapies can affect how conventional cancer treatments and medicines work and, in some cases, may even make treatment less effective.

Keep in mind that many therapies have the potential to cause injury or harm. So talk to your doctor, pharmacist and therapist before trying anything new. They can explain what is safe for you and what precautions to take. Some common safety issues include:

Mind-body practices – Sometimes people feel overwhelmed by the emotions they experience during or after a session. This usually settles soon afterwards. If you continue to feel this way, contact your therapist.

Body-based practices – See a cancer specialist therapist who follows the guidelines for safe use of these therapies. If you have cancer in the bones, or bruise or bleed easily, take care with body-based practices such as acupuncture (see pages 34–35) and massage (see pages 45–46).

Herb and plant-based therapies – You may think all natural products are safe, but this isn't always true. Some herbs can interact with conventional cancer treatment or medicines and change how they work or how the dose is absorbed (see page 16). Tell your doctor, pharmacist and therapist about any herbs, vitamins and other supplements you take or want to use. Ask that they check for any possible interactions on a medical database. See pages 14–15 for the safety of herbal medicine.

Warning signs to look out for

Before using any complementary therapy or medicine, keep the following warning signs in mind.

- The treatment claims to cure cancer and other illnesses.
- The therapist says that the medicine has worked miraculously for other people.
- The therapist claims that a proposed treatment or therapy has no side effects and is "definitely safe" to use.
- All potential side effects have not been explained.
- The therapist is not qualified in the therapy they provide, or not registered with a governing body or professional association.
- The therapist says there are clinical studies showing the effectiveness of their remedy or therapy but does not show you articles from trustworthy journals reviewed by other scientists.
- The therapist attempts to "diagnose" your condition using only a survey or checklist without a proper consultation.
- The therapist runs an in-house "laboratory" that isn't accredited by any recognised authority and may claim to diagnose "diseases" based on simple unvalidated tests (e.g. via a few drops of blood).
- The medicine is not listed with the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA, see pages 17–18).
- The therapist tells you to stop using conventional cancer treatment or medicine, because it will interfere with their therapy or remedy.
- The therapist suggests changes to your conventional cancer treatment, asks you not to speak to your doctors about the treatment, or will not tell you what ingredients are in a herbal preparation they give you.
- The treatment costs a lot of money, or you are asked to pay in advance for several months' supply.
- The therapist asks you to have very expensive tests not covered by Medicare for your condition.
- The service has no physical location and all interactions are conducted online.
- You need to travel overseas to have the treatment.

Safety of herbs

All herbs and herbal supplements should be prescribed by a qualified therapist who knows your health concerns. While herbs are seen as natural, they are not always safe for some people or situations. Even herbs you have used before may not be okay now, as they may interact with your cancer treatment; may interfere with or make your cancer treatment less effective; or may make side effects of treatment worse.

Always take your herbs as prescribed just like you would other medicines. Taking the wrong dose (e.g. a higher dose) or combination, or using the wrong part of the plant, may be poisonous (toxic) or cause side effects, including damage to the liver or kidneys.

Not all Ayurvedic and Chinese medicines have been screened for harmful substances including pesticides, harmful heavy metals such as lead and mercury, or prescription medicine ingredients. Make sure herbs and supplements you take are prescribed for you or approved by your treatment team, and from a TGA-approved source (see right).

For information on the effects of specific herbs and plants, visit:

- **Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center** – mskcc.org and search for "herbs" or download the About Herbs app to your smartphone
- **Cancer Choices** – for a supplement and other therapies database at cancerchoices.org/resources/reviews-of-complementary-therapies.

For safety of essential oils, see *Aromatherapy* on page 36.

Many pharmacies, chemists, supermarkets and health food shops sell herbal preparations. For more information on the safety, labelling and regulation of these products, visit tga.gov.au.

Tips for using herbal medicines

- Buy herbal products from a qualified therapist or reputable supplier.
- Ask for any preparation your therapist makes to be clearly labelled in English with your name, date, quantity, ingredients, dose, directions, any safety information, and the therapist's contact details.
- If you buy products online, choose a reputable pharmacy website and check that the products have an AUST L, AUST L(A) or AUST R number, showing it has been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). Visit tga.gov.au and search for "Buying health products online".
- Avoid products from other countries bought online. They aren't covered by the same quality and safety regulations as those sold in Australia. They may not include the ingredients that are listed on the label and the quality and dosage can vary from very low to high.
- Follow instructions on how to prepare and take herbs. Like any medicine, taking the right dose of herbal remedies at the right time is important for safety.
- Check the label for any warnings about side effects and drug interactions. Talk to your doctor and complementary therapist about possible side effects and what to do if you experience them or feel otherwise unwell.
- Ask your doctor, pharmacist or complementary therapist to check for interactions between your cancer, the conventional treatments and herbal therapies.
- Never self-prescribe herbal medicines, even if you think they are safe. Always check with a qualified and experienced practitioner.
- Report adverse reactions to any kind of medicine or herbal remedy to your therapist or doctor. If the reaction is serious, call Triple Zero (000) or go to the emergency department.

Taking care with herbs and supplements

Some common herbs and supplements have been shown to cause harmful interactions with cancer treatments, including surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy. Ask your surgeon or oncologist whether you need to stop taking any herbs or supplements before treatment. It is also important to take care with vitamin and mineral supplements – see page 31.

St John's wort	Used for mild to moderate depression. Shown to stop some chemotherapy drugs and other medicines working properly. May increase skin reactions to radiation therapy. If you are feeling depressed, ask your doctor about other treatments.
ginseng	May need to be avoided for some hormone-sensitive cancers, such as breast or prostate cancer.
echinacea	Should be avoided with some immunotherapy treatments. May increase the risk of bleeding, especially during chemotherapy.
curcumin/ turmeric	Can affect drug metabolism (e.g. tamoxifen) if used with some treatments (e.g. cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin). May also help some other treatments. Interactions depend on the drug, so talk to a qualified practitioner.
black cohosh	Often used for menopause symptoms (e.g. hot flushes), but not proven to help. Clinical trials show it's relatively safe, but shouldn't be used if you have liver damage. No evidence supports its use for people with cancer.
fish oil, ginkgo biloba and garlic supplements	May have a blood-thinning effect, which can cause bleeding. This could be harmful for those people with low platelet levels (e.g. from chemotherapy) or having surgery.
green tea	Has been shown to stop the cancer drug bortezomib from working properly.

Tell your complementary therapists and other health professionals about any and all herbs and supplements you use before, during or after cancer treatment. This will help them give you the best possible care.

Regulation of medicines

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is the Australian government division that checks and monitors (regulates) all medicines and therapeutic goods sold in Australia. This includes complementary medicines such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, nutritional supplements, homeopathic remedies and some aromatherapy products.

The TGA's role is to protect public health by making sure products:

- are manufactured safely and to acceptable standards of safety and quality, and do what they claim to do (efficacy)
- are produced in facilities that comply with Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) both in Australia and overseas
- can be monitored for any adverse reactions and compliance (e.g. recalls, safety warnings, etc) while being sold.

Most therapeutic goods available in Australia – whether made in Australia or overseas – must be listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG). Some homeopathic preparations and specially made (compounded) medicines do not need to be listed on the ARTG. To search the ARTG for a specific medicine, visit tga.gov.au/resources/artg.

Medicines on the ARTG are given a code to show their level of risk. This code must be displayed on the medicine label.

AUST L (listed) – These products make low-level health claims and contain pre-approved low-risk ingredients. The TGA checks them for safety and quality only, not for how well they work. Examples include sunscreen, some vitamin and mineral supplements, and some herbal medicines. You can buy them without a prescription at supermarkets, health food shops and pharmacies.

AUST L(A) (assessed listed) – These products make stronger health claims than other listed medicines and contain pre-approved ingredients. The TGA checks for safety, quality and whether the scientific evidence shows that the product does what it says it does. These products may have a "TGA assessed" symbol on the label. They are sold at pharmacies, supermarkets and health food stores, without a prescription.

AUST R (registered) – These products are considered higher risk. The TGA checks them for safety, quality and whether the scientific evidence shows that the medicine does what it claims. They include all prescription medicines, most over-the-counter medicines and some higher-risk complementary medicines. Registered complementary medicines may have a "TGA assessed" symbol on the label.

Some products suggested for use by qualified naturopaths may be labelled as "Practitioner only". These are only available to practitioners who have a degree and work in a clinic.

Regulation of complementary therapists

Some complementary therapists are registered and accredited, but depending on the type of therapy they offer, some may not be.

Registered health practitioners – The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and 15 National Boards regulate health practitioners such as doctors (medical practitioners), nurses, dentists, pharmacists, psychologists, physiotherapists and Chinese medicine practitioners (including acupuncturists).

To be registered with a National Board, health practitioners must meet certain standards. This helps ensure they are trained and safe to

practise within these professions. It is against the law for a person to pretend to be a registered health practitioner or use protected professional titles, such as doctor or nurse, if they are not registered. To check a practitioner is properly registered, visit ahpra.gov.au. If you have concerns about the performance or conduct of a registered health practitioner, contact Ahpra.

Unregulated health practitioners – Some health practitioners are not legally regulated under the national registration and accreditation scheme. They are known as unregulated health practitioners or general health service providers. They may choose to join a professional association that sets minimum standards. But membership is voluntary and requirements may vary between organisations. In some states, unregulated health practitioners must follow a Code of Conduct, which must be displayed in the premises. If you have an issue with an unregulated practitioner, see the next page for what to do.

Some complementary therapists not registered with Ahpra have set up their own regulatory bodies, including:

Naturopaths and western herbalists – The Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists (ARONAH) is a self-governing body that sets minimum standards for safe practice. Visit aronah.org.

Natural Medicine – The Australian Traditional-Medicine Society (ATMS) represents natural medicine practitioners in a range of areas (e.g. naturopathy, herbalism, acupuncture, massage). Visit atms.com.au.

Massage therapists – Visit Massage and Myotherapy Australia (AAMT) at massagemyotherapy.com.au and the Association of Massage Therapists (AMT) at amt.org.au, and search for oncology massage.

Reflexologists – The Reflexology Association of Australia is the national professional body for reflexologists. Visit reflexology.org.au.

Meditation and yoga – Visit the Meditation Association of Australia at meditationaustralia.org.au for meditation teachers, and Yoga Australia at yogaaustralia.org.au to find a yoga teacher.

Homeopaths – The Australian Register of Homoeopaths (AROH) outlines professional standards. Visit aroh.com.au.

What to do if something goes wrong

If you feel unwell or have any side effects that you think are from a complementary therapy, stop the treatment right away and talk to your therapist. They may suggest you adjust your treatment, stop the treatment permanently, seek a second opinion, or see another qualified therapist. You should also talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

If you have a serious reaction, call Triple Zero (000) or go straight to your nearest hospital emergency department. You can call the national Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 for advice (24 hours a day).

If you think that a therapist has been negligent, incompetent or unethical, you can make a complaint.

- If they belong to a professional association, contact the association with a formal complaint (see pages 60–61 for contact details).
- Contact your state or territory health care complaints commission.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) tracks health and medical scams to help the public spot and avoid scams. Visit scamwatch.gov.au or accc.gov.au.

Making informed decisions

Deciding whether to use complementary therapies should be like deciding on conventional treatment. It's important to talk to your cancer specialist, GP and complementary therapist about your situation and any treatment. Ask questions (see pages 63–64) and find out as much as possible about the complementary therapy you are considering trying.

It's your decision whether to use complementary therapies. Friends or family may encourage you to try therapies that aren't tested. They may mean well, but you may feel pressure to take their advice. It's your right to decide what is best for you. If you're not sure how to respond, you could say: "Thank you for caring and wanting to help. I really appreciate your support." Or: "I'm working closely with my medical team to make decisions that are right for me."

What to consider before you try a therapy

- What are the benefits?
- Is there scientific evidence that shows it works?
- What are the risks and possible side effects of the therapy?
- Will it interact with other medicines I am taking?
- Could it be harmful if the therapist asks me to stop or delay conventional treatment?
- Can I afford the cost of the therapy or medicines?
- Will I join a conventional treatment clinical trial? (see pages 26–27)

Cancer Council warns people not to delay or replace conventional treatment or medicine with a complementary or alternative therapy.

How to find a complementary therapist

A good starting point when looking for the right therapist is talking with your GP or cancer care team. Your cancer treatment centre may offer some complementary therapies or recommend suitable and qualified therapists in your local area.

You can ask family, friends or your support group to recommend a therapist. Some doctors, nurses and pharmacists are also trained in a complementary therapy, such as nutritional and herbal medicine, hypnotherapy, counselling, acupuncture or massage.

Many natural therapy associations have online directories to help you find therapists (see pages 60–61). See the opposite page for more tips on how to choose a therapist.

Checking a therapist is qualified

Some complementary therapists don't need specific qualifications to practise. To reduce the risk of harm, always check that the therapist is qualified, and ask if they have experience treating people with cancer. See pages 18–19 for information about the qualifications a complementary therapist may or may not have.

Some health services providing complementary therapies require therapists to be registered with a professional body, such as the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), to ensure that they have the right qualifications.

It is a breach of Ahpra's advertising guidelines for registered health practitioners to make curative claims that are not scientifically proven to be effective, as this may mislead patients.

What to consider when choosing a therapist

- Check the therapist's qualifications and whether they are registered with Ahpra, recognised by Medicare, or a member of a professional association (see pages 18–19).
- Ask if they have experience treating people with your type of cancer.
- Make sure the therapist is willing to communicate with your cancer care team, especially if you are using remedies that could interfere with your current or possible future treatment.
- Give your therapist a list of all your medicines and your treatment plan. Ask them to check for any possible interactions before recommending any therapies. This reduces the risk of them dispensing remedies or other treatments that might interact with your conventional medical treatment.
- Keep a record of treatments received and any medicines or supplements prescribed.
- Ask about the cost of each session (see page 25), how many sessions you are likely to need, and whether you will need to pay for any products or medicines.
- Ask if they have professional indemnity insurance.
- Take someone with you to appointments for support, to get involved in the discussion, take notes or to simply listen.
- Just as you may want to get a second opinion from a cancer specialist about your conventional cancer treatment and medicine, you might consider seeing more than one complementary therapist to compare how they would approach your care.

How to choose a complementary therapy

Weigh up the different types of therapies

- Think about how you hope the complementary therapy will help you. Which ones match your needs?
- Consider possible side effects and safety issues of the different therapies you are interested in. Are there any reasons why you shouldn't use them?
- Consider whether you prefer to use complementary therapies with strong scientific evidence, or whether anecdotal reports are enough for you.
- Find out what therapies are offered at your hospital or treatment centre.
- Ask how much the various therapies cost (see opposite).

Find out more about the therapies that interest you

- Gather information about the effectiveness of the therapy. Consider whether the evidence is accurate, up to date, and comes from a reliable source.
- Borrow books from a library or read about therapies on trustworthy websites (see pages 60–62).
- Ask the therapist about the quality of the product and how it is regulated.
- Talk to people who have tried these therapies, for example, at a cancer support group or through the Cancer Council Online Community. Visit cancercouncil.com.au/OC.
- Write down questions or use the checklist on pages 63–64.

Discuss your concerns

- Talk to your doctors, pharmacist and complementary therapist about: what you'd like to try; any potential interactions with your conventional treatments; side effects to be aware of; or if it will interfere with any clinical trials you may be eligible for.
- Get a second opinion if you didn't get enough information.

Understanding the costs

Complementary therapies aren't covered by government-funded schemes such as Medicare or the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). Some treatment centres offer free or lower-cost complementary therapies to patients, but many you will need to pay for.

Some private health funds cover complementary therapies, which may be called "extras" on the policy. This may include massage and shiatsu, acupuncture, naturopathy, Chinese medicine, Alexander technique, yoga, Pilates and tai chi. Check your policy to see what it covers, including the limits per visit and treatment type. Private health insurance doesn't usually cover medicines, herbs or remedies used in complementary therapies.

Complementary therapists set their own fees for consultations. The cost can vary depending on their training and experience, how long the consultation lasts, and the type of treatment you have. Fees may sometimes be expensive, so it's a good idea to speak to a few therapists to compare costs. Also ask about the long-term plan and consider that cost. If they suggest you have a therapy every 2 weeks for 6 months, consider what the total cost will be.

The consultation fee usually does not include the cost of herbal remedies, nutritional supplements or other products that they may recommend (e.g. yoga equipment or therapeutic skin creams). In particular, it's common for naturopaths, herbalists and homeopaths to mix or make remedies for you, sell you pre-made nutritional, herbal or homeopathic supplements, or give you a script for a naturopathic dispensary or a compounding pharmacy/chemist. How much you will pay for these products varies depending on the type of remedy and the ingredients, strength and quantity.

Taking part in a clinical trial

A clinical trial can help show whether a treatment works and is safe. In a randomised control trial, one group of people is given the new treatment, and the other group is given the existing standard treatment. Researchers compare the results to work out which treatment works better, is safer and is more cost-effective.

Clinical trials for complementary therapies often involve small groups of people with specific cancer types, such as breast and prostate. This can make it hard to know whether the trial results apply to other cancer types. Personal stories (anecdotal reports) are based on individual experiences and observations, and are not proven. This makes them less reliable than scientific evidence from clinical trials.

Funding for clinical trials or research into the effectiveness and safety of complementary therapies is limited. Because complementary therapies are popular in Australia, the NICM Health Research Institute at Western Sydney University was established to support research in this area (visit westernsydney.edu.au/nicmhri).

Some health professionals, universities and hospitals also run clinical trials and do research. Your hospital or support group may offer opportunities for you to take part in one of these.

Before joining a clinical trial for a complementary therapy, ask the clinical trials team and your cancer specialists about:

- what tests you may have
- whether it affects your conventional treatment
- any risks of side effects
- whether the trial has ethics approval
- any costs that you may have to pay.

Keep in mind that using some complementary therapies may mean you can't join a clinical trial for conventional cancer treatment. This is because clinical trials have strict criteria about what other medicines and supplements you can take while you are receiving the trial medicines. Your trial team will need to know about any complementary therapies you are taking to check that they are allowed during the trial.

Talk to your specialist or cancer care team to get a second opinion. If you decide to take part in a clinical trial, you can withdraw at any time. For more information, visit australiancancertrials.gov.au.

▸ See our *Understanding Clinical Trials and Research* booklet.

How to assess online information

The source – Is it reputable? Have you seen it before? Is it clear who runs the website? Check the "About us" section.

The reviewers – Has the content been reviewed by experts with qualifications specifically related to cancer?

The date – When was it reviewed? It should be in the last 2–3 years.

The claims – Is the website promoting a "miracle cure" or selling something? If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Check with your doctor before trying any new therapy.

"If you're reading a website and have an emotional response, it's likely to have an offer at the bottom of the page. It will be eliciting a reaction to try to sell you something. Actual scientific research is very bland and unemotional." TANYA, NATUROPATH

Nutrition and exercise

You may wonder if you need to change what you eat or how much exercise you do. This will depend on the cancer type, any treatments you have and your general health. Your doctor, treatment team and other health professionals can give you advice about what suits you. This chapter also has general information on how healthy food and movement can help your wellbeing.

Eating well

Cancer and its treatment can put extra demands on the body. Eating well can help you feel as good as possible, increase energy, cope as best you can with treatment side effects, and speed up recovery.

Cancer Council recommends that most people with cancer follow the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* (eatforhealth.gov.au):

- Eat a wide variety from the 5 food groups – fruit, vegetables and legumes, wholegrains, meat or alternatives and dairy or alternatives.
- Limit foods high in saturated fat, added salt and added sugars.
- Avoid sugary drinks and limit alcohol.

▸ See our *Nutrition for People Living with Cancer* booklet.

While it's best to get vitamins and minerals from eating whole foods, your doctor may sometimes recommend that you take specific supplements during and after treatment.

If you are already taking vitamins, herbs or other supplements, ask your cancer specialist whether they are safe to continue taking, and if there are any foods that could interfere with treatment or medicines.

Who can help with eating and nutrition

Sometimes it can be hard to eat enough. You may have trouble swallowing or eating certain foods. These health professionals can help you with any eating problems.

Dietitian

An accredited practising dietitian has a university degree in dietetics and is accredited by Dietitians Australia, the recognised peak body. They can:

- help you to meet your nutritional needs
- give you tailored advice on food and nutrition
- assist with managing side effects.

Nutritionist

- There are accredited dietitians, nutrition scientists and naturopathic nutritionists. Some accredited dietitians also use the title “nutritionist”.
- Nutritionists focus on how food affects health.
- Nutritionists working in the natural health industry should have at least a diploma of nutrition, or a similar qualification, from a university or naturopathic college.

Speech pathologist

- If you have trouble swallowing food and drink, a speech pathologist can help.
- They can suggest ways to prepare food and drink if swallowing is painful or difficult.

How to find a qualified health professional

- To find an accredited practising dietitian, visit Dietitians Australia at dietitiansaustralia.org.au/find-dietitian.
- To find a nutritionist, visit Nutrition Society of Australia (NSA) at nsa.asn.auor visit the Australasian Association and Register of Practicing Nutritionists (AARPN) at aarpn.com.
- To find a certified practising speech pathologist, visit Speech Pathology Australia at speechpathologyaustralia.org.au.

Unproven diets

Some complementary therapies include general dietary advice, while others have their own specific eating plans. Check with your doctor before starting any diet or eating plan that suggests cutting out entire food groups.

You might also see claims (e.g. on social media) that a particular diet or way of life can cure or control cancer. However, there are no special foods, diets or vitamin and mineral supplements that have been scientifically proven to cure cancer.

Restrictive or unproven diets can be dangerous, especially for people who have cancer. Following these diets may mean that you don't get enough energy (kilojoules/calories), protein, fat, carbohydrates, and essential vitamins and minerals. This can then affect your energy levels, cause unwanted weight loss and fatigue, and even weaken your immune system.

Getting the right nutrition

Cutting out whole food groups and losing weight can increase your risk of malnutrition, which can make it harder to cope with treatment and slow your recovery. You can become malnourished regardless of how much you weigh.

Fasting – unless it is something that your doctor has said you need to do before a test, scan or treatment – can be harmful, especially when you have cancer.

Before starting any special diet, ask your doctor, health care team and complementary therapist for advice. They can help you make safe choices and support your overall care.

Taking care with special diets

Check with your doctor and treatment team before starting any diet. Some may be harmful, especially during cancer treatment.

ketogenic or keto	High-fat, low-carb diet that puts the body into ketosis. Some claim it slows cancer growth, but there's no strong evidence. May cause nutritional issues.
vegan raw	Excludes all animal products and focuses on plant foods. May lack key nutrients such as iron and B12. No evidence it cures cancer. Needs careful planning during treatment.
paleo diet	Includes fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts, meats and eggs, but excludes grains and dairy. Check with your doctor or nutritionist, as it may not be recommended for everyone.
alkaline diet	Claims eating alkaline foods, such as green vegetables, fruits, oily fish and nuts, lowers acidity in the body and stops cancer growth. No evidence to support this.
high-dose vitamins and minerals	There is little evidence that high-dose vitamins and minerals strengthen the immune system during treatment. Certain supplements can be toxic, increase bleeding risk, or interfere with radiation therapy, chemotherapy and medicines. Some examples include folic acid (B9), which can increase some treatment side effects, and antioxidants (e.g. vitamin E, COQ10, selenium), which can affect radiation therapy and chemotherapy.
Gerson diet/ therapy	Involves drinking fresh juice several times a day, limiting foods you can eat, taking supplements, and doing coffee enemas. No scientific evidence that it is an effective treatment for cancer. Evidence shows coffee enemas can be dangerous if used too often.

Physical activity

Before starting any new exercise program, ask your cancer care team or GP about the type and amount of exercise that's best for you, and any precautions that you may need to take.

Exercise can help during and after cancer treatment. It may reduce the severity of treatment side effects; improve physical function, fatigue and psychological wellbeing; and potentially reduce cancer recurrence and improve survival for some cancer types (e.g. breast, bowel, prostate).

How much exercise should I do?

The Clinical Oncology Society of Australia (COSA) recommends that most people with cancer aim for and maintain per week:[3]

- at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate intensity aerobic exercise or 75 minutes (1¼ hours) of vigorous aerobic exercise
- 2–3 strength or resistance sessions of moderate to vigorous intensity targeting major muscle groups to build muscle strength.

Who can help with physical activity

Exercise professionals can develop an exercise program to meet your specific needs and show you how to exercise safely. Some treatment centres offer exercise help, but you may need to see someone privately.

Exercise physiologist
An accredited exercise physiologist (AEP) uses exercise to help with chronic disease management and to improve overall wellbeing. To find an exercise physiologist near you, visit essa.org.au/find-aep.

Physiotherapist
They focus on physical recovery and prevention/treatment of injuries using techniques such as exercise, massage and joint manipulation. To find a physiotherapist, visit choose.physio/find-a-physio.

Movement and muscle techniques

While studies into the use and safety of the below therapies in people with cancer are limited, these forms of therapist-led movement exercise can help improve breathing, strength, flexibility, mobility, fitness and general wellbeing. For information on yoga, see page 59.

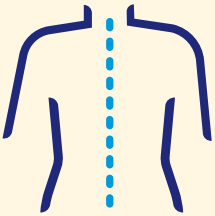
Bowen technique (Bowtech)

A therapist applies gentle pressure to acupuncture and reflex points to release the muscles and tension in soft tissue and tendons. A Bowen session lasts up to an hour, and most people have 3–4 sessions.

Pilates

A system of strengthening and stretching exercises that focus on developing the body's core (abdominals, lower back and hips). Pilates encourages the mind to be aware of its control over the muscles and change postural habits that have contributed to pain, reduced mobility and poor coordination. It started as a form of physical therapy.

Alexander technique



This therapy teaches people ways to improve posture and movement, and to use muscles efficiently. By changing the way people use their body, this therapy may enhance mental and physical functioning.

Feldenkrais method

A series of guided movements designed to improve balance and flexibility. It helps people become more aware of the way they move and how this contributes to, or compensates for, bad posture, pain and mobility restrictions. Trained therapists use touch, movement, guided imagery and mindful body awareness to stimulate the brain to improve movement and posture.

Individual therapies

This chapter provides a brief overview of complementary and other therapies commonly used alongside conventional cancer treatments – listed in alphabetical order. You will also find information about looking after your mental health through counselling or seeing a psychologist, which is part of conventional evidence-based treatment. There is also information about medical systems or therapies yet to be studied.

See *Safety concerns* on pages 12–20 and talk to your doctors and complementary therapists about which therapies are suitable for you.

Acupuncture

Acupuncturists put fine, sterile needles into certain points just under the skin. According to traditional Chinese medicine, qi (vital energy, see page 38) flows through the body in channels called meridians. Placing needles along these meridians is said to unblock and move qi, helping to reduce physical and emotional symptoms.

Research suggests that the needles stimulate the nervous system and the connective tissue in the body and help the body produce certain biomolecules such as hormones.

What to expect: After a consultation, which may include tongue and pulse analysis, the practitioner gently positions sterile needles into acupuncture points on your body. The needles are left in place for 30 seconds to 30 minutes and may be stimulated manually by twirling or by using a machine (called electro-acupuncture). You may feel a tingling or dull ache, but it shouldn't be painful.

Some acupuncturists use:

- **press needles** – small labels that stay in place for several days
- **laser acupuncture** – using laser light to stimulate acupuncture points.

Some people may bruise or bleed around the insertion point. Check with your doctor whether acupuncture is suitable for you, as penetration of the skin barrier by needles may increase the risk of infection or bleeding for some people having cancer treatment.

For more about what to expect during an acupuncture session, visit Chinese Medicine Board of Australia at chinesemedicineboard.gov.au/About/What-is-Chinese-medicine.aspx.

Evidence: International clinical guidelines recommend acupuncture for joint pain related to using aromatase inhibitors, an option for managing cancer pain and musculoskeletal pain, tingling in the hands and feet from chemotherapy (peripheral neuropathy), cancer-related fatigue and hot flushes.

Evidence also suggests that acupuncture may help with nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy, with trouble sleeping and with anxiety. It is not clear whether it helps relieve dry mouth, but several studies are underway.

In Australia, use of the term acupuncturist is regulated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia (CMBA). To check whether your acupuncturist is registered, visit ahpra.gov.au. Some registered acupuncturists have special training in treating cancer-related conditions. Ask your doctor whether acupuncture is offered at your treatment centre.

Aromatherapy

This is the use of essential oils extracted from plants (see below). The oils are used mainly during massage but can also be used in a bath or an oil burner (sometimes called a diffuser or vaporiser). When inhaled or absorbed through the skin, the oils are thought to have a positive effect on the body's tissues, the mind and spirit.

What to expect: The aromatherapist blends essential oils and adds them to a base (carrier) oil before applying them to your skin during a massage. See *Safety of essential oils* below.

Evidence: There is some limited evidence that aromatherapy may have positive short-term effects on pain and anxiety in people with cancer. There is some small evidence that aromatherapy improves sleep and quality of life.

Safety of essential oils: Essential oils are concentrated oils that are extracted from plants, such as lavender or tea tree. They are very strong, so they must be diluted with a base oil before using on your skin. Base (or carrier) oils are usually made from kernels or nuts, such as almonds, or sometimes castor oil. Sometimes mineral oil is used instead as it is odourless.

These oils should never be used inside the body (e.g. taken in a drink or swallowed). Also take care not to touch your eyes if some oil gets on your hands.

Allergic reactions to oils are rare, but some people find they irritate the skin, or the smell makes them feel nauseous or gives them a headache. Let your therapist know if you have had reactions to oils in the past, or if you don't like certain smells.

Art therapy

The process of creating art can be a way to express feelings and explore issues that may be hard to put into words. Talking about the work that you create with a trained art therapist can help you better understand your emotions and concerns.

What to expect: With the support of an art therapist, you can create any type of art: drawing, painting, collage, sculpture or digital work. Some cancer centres run art therapy programs. Art therapy may be done individually or in a group. You don't need to be "good" at art. The focus is on the process of making artwork, not the result.

Evidence: There is some evidence art therapy can help with symptoms of fatigue, anxiety, depression and improve quality of life. Anecdotal reports suggest it improves coping skills and emotional wellbeing.

What is Ayurvedic medicine?

This is an ancient Indian system. Ayurveda is from the Sanskrit words ayur (life) and veda (knowledge).

Key concepts

- Health is achieved when the mind, body and spirit are in balance.
- Every person is a combination of 5 elements: air, water, fire, earth and space.
- These elements combine to form 3 energies or life forces called doshas: vata, kapha and pitta.

What to expect

The practitioner will ask about your lifestyle, diet, emotional wellbeing and medical history. They will look at your tongue and take your pulse. All this information is used to assess what Ayurveda calls your vital force and overall balance in the body.

Suggested treatments vary from person to person, and may include herbal medicine, dietary changes, massage, meditation and yoga.

Chinese medicine

Chinese medicine is based on the idea of maintaining balance between the mind, body and environment to prevent and manage diseases. It focuses on the person's overall condition, not just their symptoms. There are different Chinese medicine practices, including acupuncture; breathing and movement exercises called qi gong; movement exercises called tai chi; the practice of burning herbs near the skin called moxibustion; herbal medicine; and Chinese dietary therapy or food therapy (what you eat).

Key concepts

Qi: According to Chinese medicine, everyone has a vital energy or force in the body known as qi (pronounced "chee"). When you are healthy, qi flows easily through the body's meridians (channels). If the flow of qi becomes blocked, the body's harmony and balance is affected, causing disease.

Yin and Yang: Qi is made up of 2 opposite but complementary forces known as Yin, represented by water, and Yang, by fire. Yin and Yang are believed to be in everything and the balance between them maintains harmony in your body, mind and the universe.

Elements: Chinese medicine uses the theory of 5 elements – fire, earth, metal, water and wood (see right). These elements relate to particular organs and tissues in the body.

What to expect: A practitioner will ask you questions and do a physical examination, which may include looking at your tongue and taking your pulse. Treatment is individual and may include a combination of therapies.

To learn more about what Chinese medicine is and what to expect during a Chinese medicine consultation, visit the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia's (CMBA) website at chinesemedicineboard.gov.au/About/What-is-Chinese-medicine.aspx.

Chinese herbal medicine

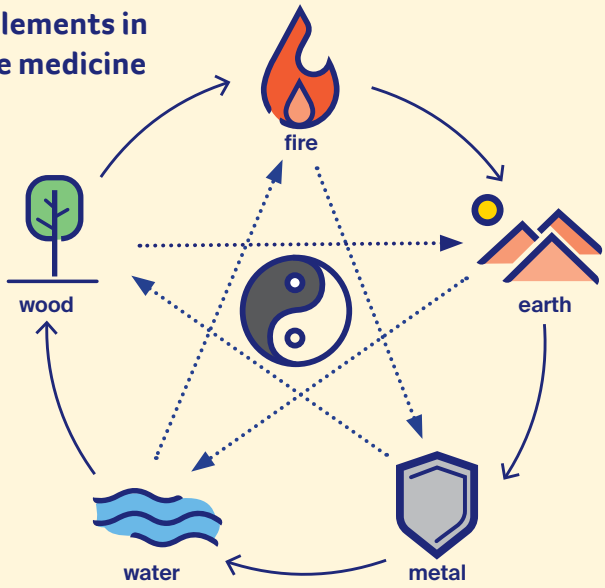
In Chinese herbal medicine, various parts of certain plants (such as leaves, roots, stems, flowers and seeds) are used as medicine, based on the belief that they can influence meridians and help restore balance in the body.

What to expect: A practitioner will choose a combination of herbs and foods with the aim of bringing your body back into balance. They may make a formula tailored to you, or dispense herbal medicines pre-packaged as granules, pills or raw herbs to be made into a tea.

Evidence: Many Chinese herbs have been scientifically evaluated for how well they work for people with cancer. Studies have found benefits for some herbs. For example, American ginseng has shown benefits for cancer-related fatigue. Research is continuing to examine the benefits of different herbs and different herbal combinations.

Safety: Chinese herbal medicine is a complex area and you should see a registered Chinese medicine practitioner rather than treating yourself. See page 15 for tips on using herbs and visit ahpra.gov.au to check your practitioner is registered with the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia.

The 5 elements in Chinese medicine



Counselling

Talking with a counsellor or psychologist can help you identify goals you would like to achieve, develop ways to deal with difficult situations or relationships in your life, and look at how to manage your feelings. Counselling allows you to explore ways of resolving negative thoughts and feelings that may affect your health and day-to-day life.

Counselling provides a safe, supportive and confidential environment to learn new coping skills. It can strengthen your ability to deal with challenges, and help you learn new ways of looking at your life choices and behaviours. Some people find it easier to express their emotions to a counsellor than with someone they know. You can talk about thoughts and feelings that you might not feel comfortable sharing with your family and friends.

Counselling may also give you strategies to manage fear of the cancer coming back (recurrence). This can be helpful after treatment ends.

What to expect: Sessions may be face-to-face, over the phone or online. There are different types including cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), grief therapy, life coaching, acceptance and commitment therapy, and person-centred therapy. Ask the therapist about their approach to see if it suits you. Counselling can be for you, or for family and friends affected by cancer.

Evidence: There is strong evidence that counselling can help to manage distress, fear and can improve quality of life. There is good evidence that psychological therapies such as CBT can help reduce a range of concerns, including anxiety and depression, cancer-related fatigue and insomnia. Specific therapies (including CBT) for managing the fear of recurrence have shown some benefits.

Who can help with emotions

If you would like to talk to someone or need emotional support there are a variety of health professionals and services that can help. It's important to find someone who is suitably qualified and who you feel comfortable talking with. Let them know if you have a history of anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns, as you may be feeling more vulnerable during this time.

psychologist	Psychologists use evidence-based strategies to guide people through issues with how they think, feel and learn. They cannot prescribe medicines. To be registered with Ahpra, a psychologist must complete 4 years of psychology at undergraduate level, followed by postgraduate study and ongoing continuing professional development.
counsellor	Counsellors help people develop strategies to manage their concerns. They don't need any qualifications to practise, though many counsellors have qualifications in counselling, nursing, social work or psychology. It's a good idea to check their qualifications before making an appointment. Counselling may be available through your local Cancer Council – call 13 11 20. Beyond Blue offers free counselling – call 1300 22 4636 or visit beyondblue.org.au.
psychiatrist	Psychiatrists are trained and Ahpra-registered medical doctors who specialise in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illness. They can prescribe medicines to help manage a range of mental and emotional conditions.

How to find a mental health professional

Ask your GP for a referral – you may be eligible for a Medicare rebate. To find a psychologist near you, visit psychology.org.au/find-a-psychologist. To find a psychiatrist, visit yourhealthinmind.org/find. You may be able to see a psychologist or psychiatrist at your hospital or cancer treatment centre. Online self-help programs or smartphone apps can help you track how you're feeling. Many are free to download. Visit moodgym.com.au or mindspot.org.au. For 24-hour crisis support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au.

Flower remedies

Also called flower essences, these are highly diluted extracts made from the flowers of wild plants. There are many types from around the world, including the Original Bach Flower Remedies, developed in England in the 1930s, and Australian Bush Flower Essences, developed in Australia in the 1980s. They may be used by a flower essence practitioner, some naturopaths, herbalists or other complementary therapists.

Some people believe that flower remedies balance the mind, body and spirit, and help you cope with emotional issues.

What to expect: Similar to a counselling session, you may be asked about problems you're having and how you feel about or respond to certain situations. The therapist may suggest a single essence for you. Or they may prepare a blend of essences (remedy) that is tailored specifically for you. You then take the essence, usually in water, several times a day.

Always check what's in the remedy (the name may not include the ingredients) and discuss with your cancer care team before taking it. Some herbs may interact with some cancer treatments and medicines, and cause side effects. See pages 14–15 for tips on using herbs safely.

Evidence: Scientific evidence does not support the use of flower remedies for treating diseases. However, anecdotal reports suggest they may help reduce fear and distress.

"After surgery, my naturopath gave me Bach Flower Remedies for fear, shock and exhaustion. These helped me relax." LOUISE

Healing touch

This is the placement of hands in specific sequences above or on the body to detect temperature, texture or what are called vibration changes, which practitioners believe indicate areas of energy imbalance. Healing touch claims to work with your personal energy field to support the body's own natural ability to heal.

What to expect: Healing touch can be done while you are sitting, lying down or standing. The therapist may perform a meditation and then move their hands over your body.

Evidence: There is no scientific evidence of energy fields or that healing touch has any medical benefit. Some people find healing touch relaxing.

What is homeopathy?

Homeopathy uses plant, mineral and animal substances – highly diluted in water – as remedies.

Key concepts

It is based on the theory that "like cures like" and that remedies stimulate energy in the body to relieve symptoms, restore vitality and reduce emotional imbalances.

What to expect

The homeopath asks about your medical history, and considers how you respond physically and emotionally to your symptoms.

They may prescribe a remedy as liquid drops, tablets or a skin cream.

Evidence

There is no reliable scientific evidence that homeopathy works. Most remedies are so diluted they are likely non-toxic. But some products, especially if bought online or overseas, may contain active substances, heavy metals or harmful contaminants. There are reports of serious side effects from certain homeopathic preparations. Only use products regulated by the TGA and discuss it with your care team first.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy uses deep relaxation to help people become aware of their inner thoughts and find ways to manage them. It may help improve mental wellbeing and overcome mental blocks around anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, pain, insomnia and unwanted habits such as smoking.

What to expect: A trained therapist will ask you about your current health and medical history and discuss your reasons for having hypnotherapy. They will then guide you into a deeply relaxed state, known as an altered state of consciousness. In this relaxed state, your subconscious can focus on your treatment goals, making them more achievable for your conscious mind.

Evidence: Clinical studies show that hypnotherapy can help people cope with pain, anxiety, fatigue, hot flushes and nausea and vomiting related to cancer treatment.

Light and temperature therapies

Research into light therapy you can do at home or at a spa is limited, but suggests it may be okay in some specific situations (e.g. for oral mucositis, some pain or for lymphoedema). But it hasn't been shown to be generally safe for people with cancer. There is particular concern about using red light therapy over tumour sites. Talk to your doctor about light therapy, even if you've used it before.

Some hot or cold therapies claim to help with circulation, scarring, sleep or immune function. But saunas and steam rooms may be dangerous for people with heart concerns. Your treatment team may offer cold therapy during chemotherapy to reduce the chance of peripheral neuropathy (tingling in hands/feet), but other cold therapies might not be suitable. Check with your doctor before trying heat or cold therapies.

Massage

Massage involves moving (manipulating) muscles and rubbing or stroking soft tissues to promote relaxation. By applying pressure to muscles and pressure points, massage helps to release both muscular and emotional tension.

Oncology massage therapists are specially trained to adjust pressure, speed, duration and direction of strokes to provide a safe session for a person with cancer. The style of massage used will depend on the treatment you're having. It may be helpful at any stage, from those newly diagnosed, to people who have finished their cancer treatment.

There is no evidence that massage can increase the risk of cancer cells spreading to other parts of the body. A type of massage called manual lymphatic drainage can help reduce the symptoms of lymphoedema (swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid).

What to expect: Massage is usually done in a warm, quiet room while you lie on a massage table or sit in a chair. The therapist uses a variety of strokes on different parts of the body. In people with cancer, therapists may adjust their pressure and avoid certain areas of the body.

Some styles of massage are done with you fully clothed; others require you to undress to your underwear so the therapist can use oil to move their hands over your skin more easily. The therapist may place pillows under different parts of your body for support. Let the therapist know if you need a change in pressure or a blanket.

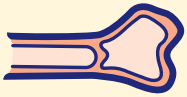
Evidence: Many scientific studies have shown that oncology massage may help manage stress, anxiety, pain, depression, fatigue and insomnia in people who have had chemotherapy or surgery for cancer.

Massage safety for people with cancer

Chemotherapy – This drug treatment affects the whole body. If you have a chemotherapy port, massage should not be done in this area. Some people who have chemotherapy have tingling in their hands or feet (peripheral neuropathy), or may find they bruise or bleed easily, so need to avoid deep massage.

Radiation therapy – The skin may be sensitive, red and appear sunburnt after external radiation therapy. Avoid massage to the treated area once any skin changes appear or your skin becomes sensitive. Massage oils, especially ones with fragrance or essential oils, may make already irritated skin feel worse.

Surgery – Recovery takes time. It's important to avoid massaging the surgical area until wounds have healed and there are no complications such as blood clots, infections or trapped pockets of fluid under the skin (seroma). Ask your surgeon when it is safe to start scar massage after surgery.



Bone fragility – Radiation therapy, medicines or the cancer itself may make bones more fragile. Care should be taken to avoid applying too much pressure.

Risk of lymphoedema – Radiation therapy or lymph node removal in the neck, armpit or groin can increase your risk of lymphoedema. See a trained lymphoedema therapist. If you already have lymphoedema, manual lymphatic drainage from a trained therapist may help. Visit lymphoedema.org.au to find a registered practitioner.

► See our *Understanding Lymphoedema* fact sheet.

Medicinal cannabis

Some people want to find out about using cannabis for medical purposes. Cannabis is a plant that contains chemicals called cannabinoids, which act on certain receptors found on cells in our body. Cannabinoids can also be made in a laboratory.

Medicinal cannabis contains standard amounts of cannabinoids. Two cannabinoids commonly used in medicinal cannabis are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).

Evidence

There is no evidence that medicinal cannabis can treat or cure cancer.[4] Research studies have looked at the potential benefits of using medicinal cannabis to relieve cancer symptoms and treatment side effects. There is some evidence it may help people with certain symptoms and side effects (e.g. nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy) if conventional nausea treatment doesn't work.

To date, published studies have shown medicinal cannabis to have little effect on appetite, weight, pain or sleep problems. Research is continuing in these areas.

Legal access

Medicinal cannabis is legal in Australia when prescribed by a medical practitioner registered to prescribe it. Most medicinal cannabis products in Australia are unapproved, meaning that your doctor must get approval from the government before prescribing. If your doctor doesn't prescribe medicinal cannabis, they may still support your decision to use it, so tell them if you get a cannabis prescription elsewhere.

The laws about access to medicinal cannabis vary in each state and territory, which may affect whether it can be prescribed for you.

The TGA allows low-dose CBD products (up to 150 mg of CBD a day) to be listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG) and sold over the counter by pharmacists. At the time of publication (December 2025), no product has been approved via this pathway.

Medicinal cannabis may interact with some medicines and affect your driving. Visit tga.gov.au and search "medicinal cannabis" for information.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully present and engaged in the moment – free from distraction or judgement. Common mindfulness practices can include focusing on the breath and observing each rise and fall, body scan meditations, and mindful walking. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a 6–8 week course designed to help you cope better and feel more at ease in your life.

People practise mindfulness to change the way they think about experiences. By becoming aware of thoughts and feelings, you can choose how to handle them in the moment. This can improve attention and awareness, and strengthen wellbeing.

What to expect: Mindfulness can be practised sitting, standing or lying down. An instructor will support you to focus attention in a mindful way. This could be through following a series of exercises that focus on breathwork and calming the mind.

Evidence: There is good evidence to show that MBSR can lower the levels of stress hormones in your body, which can assist in healing and improve immune function. Clinical practice guidelines include MBSR as an option for managing cancer-related fatigue. Studies on mindfulness show it helps improve the quality of life of people with cancer, increases coping, and can reduce pain, anxiety, depression and nausea.

"Even 13 years after I was treated for cancer, in the back of my mind I still worry that it will come back. I did a mindfulness course to help me deal with this fear and found it really helpful." JOHN

Music therapy

Music therapy may help people express themselves, feel more in control and hopeful, focus on healing, feel less anxious, connect with others and simply enjoy the moment.

What to expect: You don't need to be musical to take part or benefit. The structure of the session depends on the needs of the participants and what you feel comfortable with. You may play instruments, sing, write lyrics, or listen to music and discuss how it affects you. Music therapy may be done in a group or one-on-one with a therapist.

Evidence: Some evidence-based studies show music therapy can improve anxiety, depression, fatigue and quality of life in people with cancer.

What is naturopathy?

Naturopathy focuses on the foods you eat, and your individual health, wellbeing and nutrition needs.

Key concepts

- Good health depends on the connection between the mind, body and spirit.
- The body has the ability to heal.
- Based on 6 principles: use the healing power of nature; find and treat the causes; first do no harm; doctor as teacher; treat the whole person; focus on prevention.

What to expect

After asking about your health, a naturopath may suggest changes to your diet, more time in nature (e.g. water and sunlight), massage or exercise, lifestyle changes, counselling, and herbal or nutritional remedies. A naturopathic nutritionist gives advice on diet using nutrient-rich whole foods. They recommend avoiding artificial flavours, chemicals and other additives. You may be prescribed specific herbs or supplements.

Qi gong

Qi gong – pronounced "chee goong" – is part of Chinese medicine (see pages 38–39). "Qi" means vital energy and "gong" means work. Qi gong combines movement with controlled breathing and meditation. It may be considered both a body-based practice and an energy therapy.

In Chinese medicine, movements performed in qi gong are believed to keep the flow of energy running through the body's energy channels. This is said to help improve quality of life, including mental and physical wellbeing.

What to expect: Wear comfortable clothes. The session starts with warm-up exercises to loosen the body. The instructor then guides you through a series of slow movements, to help you become more aware of your energy. Classes may also include meditation while lying down, sitting, standing or walking.

Evidence: Clinical studies suggest that qi gong improves quality of life and reduces fatigue, pain and anxiety. Anecdotal reports suggest that it helps improve general fitness.

Reflexology

Reflexology is a type of foot and hand massage based on the belief that areas on the feet and hands, called "reflex points", correspond to the body's internal organs and systems, like a map. Practitioners believe that pressing on reflex points can unblock energy pathways (meridians) and promote health in the related area of the body.

What to expect: After discussing your health and concerns, you take off your shoes. While you are sitting or lying down, the reflexologist

works with their hands on your bare feet, possibly using cream or oil. Many people find it relaxing, like a massage, although sometimes certain parts of the hand or foot may feel tender or painful.

Some cancer treatments (e.g. taxanes, capecitabine) can cause sore skin on the feet and weak nails. In this case you should avoid reflexology.

Evidence: Some clinical practice guidelines include reflexology as an option for managing chemotherapy side effects such as pain and peripheral neuropathy (tingling in the hands and feet). Several clinical trials have looked at using reflexology for anxiety, fatigue, breathlessness and quality of life. However, studies have involved small groups, so it's difficult to say whether the reflexology had any effect.

Reiki

The term reiki is a Japanese word meaning universal life energy. It is a gentle hands-on therapy that is based on the belief that therapists can channel healing energy into another person to promote health. Some people use reiki because they believe it improves physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

What to expect: During a reiki session, you sit or lie down fully clothed. The therapist places their hands in a series of positions on or slightly above your body. The aim is to promote wellbeing.

Evidence: There is no reliable scientific evidence that reiki has any benefits. Anecdotal reports suggest that reiki may be calming and relaxing for some people, and other anecdotal reports claim that it may be helpful in relieving pain and anxiety, reducing stiffness and improving posture.

Relaxation and meditation

Relaxation is a process that uses slow breathing and muscle-loosening exercises to physically and mentally calm the body. Techniques include progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, deep breathing, massage, aromatherapy and yoga.

Meditation is the practice of focusing awareness and attention on the present moment and on the senses of the body. It is an important part of many religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, but you don't have to be religious to meditate. There are different types of meditation techniques, including breathwork.

Relaxation and meditation may help to release muscle tension, reduce anxiety and depression, and help improve quality of life. They may be used to help calm and relax the body and mind.

What to expect: Serene music may be played to create a peaceful environment. The therapist will guide you through exercises to help you learn the skills of relaxation and meditation, which you can then practise at home. Guided imagery uses sound and visual prompts to encourage your imagination to create pleasant thoughts. After a period of relaxation, you will usually be prompted to stay awake and enjoy your relaxed state of mind. Relaxation and meditation can be done sitting or lying down.

Evidence: Clinical practice guidelines include offering a combination of guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation for people experiencing pain after cancer treatment. Clinical studies have shown that people being treated for cancer who practise relaxation often have lower levels of anxiety, stress, pain and depression. Relaxation techniques have also been shown to improve sleep.

Your hospital or cancer support group may offer relaxation and meditation groups. Self-help podcasts, online videos and smartphone apps can also guide you through the techniques. To try our free relaxation and meditation podcast *Finding Calm During Cancer*, visit cancercouncil.com.au/podcasts.

Sound therapy

Sound therapy, also known as sound healing, uses vibrational music or instruments such as Tibetan singing bowls, gongs and tuning forks to create different sound frequencies. Singing bowls are usually made from crystal, but may sometimes be brass, glass or metal. Their size varies, and they can be quite large, with different sizes creating different "notes" and vibrations.

Sound therapy is often practised as a "sound bath" or "frequency healing" where your body is surrounded by soothing sounds designed to induce relaxation and healing.

The vibrations and sound frequencies produced during sound therapy are believed to reduce stress and help balance emotions. It's a gentle, non-invasive therapy that may help anxiety, fatigue and tension.

What to expect: In a typical session, you'll lie down comfortably while a practitioner plays instruments like singing bowls or gongs – often close to your body. Sometimes centres may offer sessions using recorded "frequency" music. The sounds and vibrations surround you and may encourage deep relaxation.

Evidence: Scientific studies show that sound therapy may help with anxiety and depression, improve sleep and reduce fatigue. Research also suggests that it may promote relaxation and stress relief.

Spiritual practices

Spirituality is a very individual concept. For some people, it may mean being part of an organised religion such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or connecting deeply to culture. For others, spirituality may reflect their individual beliefs about the universe and their place in it, or a search for meaning and purpose in their lives.

When people are diagnosed with cancer, the spiritual aspect of their lives often becomes more important. People may find comfort in prayer, meditation or quiet contemplation.

Receiving care from a spiritual care practitioner, who may be called a pastoral carer, chaplain or priest, can help people – even those who are not part of an organised religion.

What to expect: If you are part of a spiritual or religious community, you may benefit from:

- prayer or meditation groups
- a feeling of unity and connection with the congregation
- practical, emotional and spiritual support offered by members of your spiritual or religious community.

If you are not part of a formal community, you can find out more about your area of spiritual interest from a spiritual care practitioner, support groups, friendship groups, your local library or online. A spiritual care practitioner is often a member of the team at hospitals and cancer treatment centres.

Evidence: There's growing scientific evidence of a positive link between spiritual practice and health. It has been shown to reduce stress, instil a sense of peace and improve the ability to manage challenges.

Tai chi

A part of Chinese medicine, tai chi combines gentle movement, deep breathing techniques and meditation. The movements create stability in the body, reflecting the ancient Chinese concept of balance known as Yin and Yang (see page 38).

The breathwork of tai chi is calming and meditative. Creating and holding the poses helps to loosen and strengthen muscles. Tai chi can be modified for groups that are less mobile.

What to expect: During class there will be serene music playing. The class usually starts with warm-up exercises. You will be shown different moves and assisted to perform them. The instructor may use names to describe the poses, for example, "white crane spreads its wings".

Movements start out simple and gradually get harder, with many parts of the body needing to move to achieve the pose. The class ends with cooling down and relaxation.

Evidence: Studies have shown that tai chi can improve quality of life, balance, agility, flexibility and muscle tone in cancer survivors. While there is less certainty, some studies suggest that tai chi may also help reduce fatigue, anxiety, depression and stress.

"I joined a tai chi class organised through the Carers Association and also attended their support workshops and relaxation sessions. The encouragement from other carers gave me the confidence boost I needed." ISABELLA (CARER)

Traditional healing practices

Some people use traditional healing practices as a complementary therapy. If you want to use traditional remedies from your culture alongside conventional medical treatment, ask your treatment team.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, healing is holistic. This mean that it includes the physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural aspects of wellbeing. Many First Nations communities use bush medicine, sometimes called medijin or medijina. It can help to reconnect with land, culture and ancestors, and to bring peace of mind.

Bush medicines may include a smoking ceremony, something you put on your skin or plant remedies passed down through generations.

Safety and precautions

Bush medicines can be meaningful and supportive, but some may also interact with cancer treatments or interfere with medicines. It's possible they may also cause side effects or affect your cancer treatment outcomes. Although herbs and plants may be natural, they still need to be used with care. See pages 14–15 for more on this.

Bush medicine is not a replacement for conventional medical treatment. Tell your health care team about traditional practices that you plan to try (see pages 10–11). Being honest about what you want to try helps ensure your care is safe, respectful, and aligned with your values.

Accessing traditional therapies

If you want to use bush medicine, discuss this with a traditional healer, an Aboriginal Health Worker or an Elder. They can guide you on culturally safe practices and help you to communicate with other members of your medical team. There are many nations and traditions amongst First Nations peoples, so therapies vary depending on whose country you live on. Try to connect with local health workers and providers to get the best knowledge and support.

Access traditional healing through:

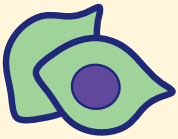
- community healing centres (e.g. Akeyulerre in Alice Springs)
- Ngangkari healers, who offer spiritual and physical healing in some hospitals and clinics
- local Aboriginal Medical Services, which may provide bush medicine workshops or referrals.

Some common bush medicine plants

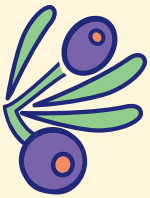
Gumbi gumbi: Traditionally used for colds, skin conditions, fatigue, digestion and emotional wellbeing. It's taken as a tea or tonic.

Native lemongrass: Used for calming effects and to reduce pain. It may ease stress and discomfort during treatment.

Emu bush: Used in smoking ceremonies and on the skin for general wellbeing. Being studied in research.



Kakadu plum: Taken as a powder, supplement or eaten to help support general health during treatment. This fruit is very high in vitamin C and antioxidants. You should avoid it if your doctor has said you should not take vitamin C supplements.



Maroon bush (Murrin murrin): Traditionally used for infections, chronic illness and to support general health. Often taken as a tea. It should not be taken without medical advice and needs a prescription in Western Australia.

Western herbal medicine

Herbal medicines are often used to help manage the side effects of conventional cancer treatments, such as reducing fatigue and improving wellbeing. Evidence shows that they should only be used in addition to conventional medical treatment, rather than as an alternative therapy.

What to expect: After asking you some questions, the practitioner puts together a holistic picture of your health. They will look for underlying reasons for your ill health or symptoms, and provide a herbal mixture aimed at addressing the causes and symptoms of your illness.

The practitioner may give you a pre-made herbal formula, but more often they will prepare a blend of herbs specifically for your needs.

Herbal medicines can be prepared as liquid extracts, usually taken with water; as herbs that are made into a tea or infusion; as creams applied to the body; or as tablets or capsules.

Western herbal medicines are usually made from herbs traditionally grown in Europe and North America, but some come from Asia.

Evidence: There is a wide body of research into the effectiveness and safety of many herbs, and some studies show promising results. Speak to your doctor, pharmacist and herbal medicine practitioner about the potential benefits and side effects of any herbal preparations.

Using herbs is complex and it's best to see an experienced practitioner rather than trying to treat yourself. Some herbs may interact with conventional cancer treatment or medicines, and change how the treatment works or how the dose is absorbed. See pages 14–15 for tips on using herbs safely.

Yoga

Yoga can increase physical activity and improve emotional health. It involves holding postures (asanas) with the body, being aware of breathing, and focusing the mind. There are many styles of yoga ranging from gentle to more vigorous.

What to expect: Wear comfortable clothes. You may be asked to remove your shoes before entering the yoga room. You usually use a yoga mat, which may be provided, or you may need to bring your own. Most classes last about one hour. A session usually begins with warm-up stretches, followed by a series of yoga postures. A typical routine also involves focusing on quietening the mind and working with the breath, and ends with some form of relaxation.

Laughter yoga combines breathing, clapping and physical laughter exercises. It's based on laughter as a form of movement and breathwork, rather than anything to do with jokes or humour.

Some cancer centres offer yoga classes designed for people with cancer, having treatment or in recovery. If possible, see a yoga therapist who works with people who have cancer. This is because certain styles of yoga may not be suitable at some stages of cancer or depending on your abilities. Ask your yoga teacher about any precautions you should take and possible modifications or support you may need.

Evidence: Clinical practice guidelines on cancer pain include yoga for people with pain related to taking aromatase inhibitors, as well as pain after treatment for some cancers. They also suggest yoga as a way to manage cancer-related fatigue. There is evidence that yoga can decrease stress and anxiety, reduce sleep disturbances, improve muscle strength and enhance quality of life. The breathing focus may help reduce pain.

Support and information

Professional and complementary therapist associations

These associations represent a range of complementary therapists in Australia. Contact them to learn more about the therapy and to find a practitioner.

Association of Massage Therapists	**amt.org.au**
Australasian Association of Ayurveda	**ayurved.org.au**
Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA)	**acupuncture.org.au**
Australian Feldenkrais Guild	**feldenkrais.org.au**
Australian Foundation for Healing Touch	**healingtouch.org.au**
Australian Homoeopathic Association	**homeopathyoz.org**
Australian Hypnotherapists Association	1300 55 22 54 **ahahypnotherapy.org.au**
Australian Music Therapy Association	**austmta.org.au**
Australian Natural Therapists Association	1800 817 577 **australiannaturaltherapists association.com.au**
Australian Naturopathic Practitioners Association	1800 422 885 **anpa.asn.au**
Australian Physiotherapy Association	1300 306 622 **australian.physio**
Australian Psychological Society	1800 333 497 **psychology.org.au**

Australian Register of Homoeopaths	**aroh.com.au**
Australian Register of Naturopaths and Herbalists	**aronah.org**
Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique	**austat.org.au**
Australian Traditional-Medicine Society	1800 456 855 **atms.com.au**
Bowen Therapy Federation of Australia	**bowen.asn.au**
Chinese Medicine & Acupuncture Society of Australia	**cmasa.org.au**
Dietitians Australia	1800 812 942 **dietitiansaustralia.org.au**
Exercise & Sports Science Australia	**essa.org.au**
International Aromatherapy and Aromatic Medicine Association	**iaama.org.au**
Laughter Yoga Australia	**laughteryoga-australia.org**
Massage & Myotherapy Australia	**massagemyotherapy.com.au**
Naturopaths & Herbalists Association of Australia	**nhaa.org.au**
Oncology Massage Training	**oncologymassagetraining.com.au**
Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia	**pacfa.org.au**
Reflexology Association of Australia	**reflexology.org.au**
Reiki Australia	**reikiaustralia.com.au**
Yoga Australia	1300 881 451 **yogaaustralia.org.au**

Useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. These websites are good sources of support and information.

Australian	
Cancer Council Australia	**cancer.org.au**
Cancer Council Online Community	**cancercouncil.com.au/OC**
Cancer Council podcasts	**cancercouncil.com.au/podcasts**
Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency	**ahpra.gov.au**
Cancer Australia	**canceraustralia.gov.au**
Carer Gateway	**carergateway.gov.au**
Chinese Medicine Board of Australia	**chinesemedicineboard.gov.au**
National Institute of Complementary Medicine	**westernsydney.edu.au/nicmhri**
Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA)	**tga.gov.au**
International	
American Cancer Society	**cancer.org**
Cancer Choices	**cancerchoices.org**
Cancer Research UK	**cancerresearchuk.org**
Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Cancer	**cam-cancer.org**
Macmillan Cancer Support	**macmillan.org.uk**
Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center	**mskcc.org**
National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health	**nccih.nih.gov**
Society for Integrative Oncology	**integrativeonc.org**

Question checklist

You may find these suggestions helpful when thinking about what to ask.

Questions to ask your doctor or treatment team

- Are you familiar with complementary therapies or medicines?
- Does this hospital or treatment centre offer complementary therapies?
- Would you have any concerns with me using complementary therapies? If so, why and what should I do if I decide to use them?
- Do you know whether the complementary medicines I want to take will interfere with my conventional treatments?
- Can you recommend a complementary therapist who practises safely?
- Can you give me a letter for my therapist outlining my treatment?
- Will using a complementary therapy mean I can't take part in a clinical trial for conventional treatment? Am I a likely candidate for one? (see pages 26–27).

General questions to ask potential complementary therapists

- What are your qualifications? Are you part of a professional association?
- What training or experience do you have in treating people with cancer? Have you treated anyone with my type of cancer?
- Do you work in an integrative way with conventional health practitioners?
- What exactly is the therapy? How does it work?
- How can this therapy help me? How long will it take to work?
- Are there any precautions I should take? Or any possible side effects?
- Has the therapy been tested in clinical trials? Are the findings published and available to read?
- Can this therapy be used safely with conventional treatment or medicines?
- Are you willing to talk to my doctors or other health professionals I see?
- How will I know that the therapy is working?
- Do you do home visits if I am not well enough to attend your clinic?
- What is the consultation cost? Will I get a Medicare or health fund rebate?
- How long are your consultations? What can I expect during a session?
- How many consultations do you recommend, and how often?
- Do you dispense your own medicines and supplements?
- How much can I expect to pay for medicines, supplements or aids?
- Have the products or medicines you dispense been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration?

Questions about specific therapies

Mind–body techniques

- What type of therapist would you recommend for my concerns?
- Can you refer me to a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor?

Body-based practices

- Are there forms of massage or bodywork that you think could help me?
- Which types of massage or bodywork, if any, should I avoid?
- Are there areas of the body that a massage therapist or acupuncturist should avoid or take special care with?
- What precautions, if any, should I take?
- Is acupuncture safe for me?
- Could I try qi gong, tai chi or yoga?
- What level of exercise intensity would suit me?
- Can you write a letter approving bodywork therapy for me?

Therapies based on diet

- Should I see a dietitian or a nutritionist?
- Are there any general dietary changes I should make?
- What can I eat to improve my digestion and bowel movements?
- Are there any vitamin, mineral or nutritional supplements that could help manage specific side effects or that I should take?
- Are there any foods or supplements I should definitely have, or definitely avoid, during and after cancer treatment?

Therapies using herbs and plants

- Are there any herbs that you would recommend for me to try during or after cancer treatment?
- What dose should I take? Are there any side effects?
- Are there any herbs I should avoid because of my medicines, surgery or other conventional treatments?
- If I use herbal medicine, when should I take it in relation to my other medicines or conventional treatments? Is it safe to use at the same time or should I take it at a different time?
- Do you think using flower remedies or homeopathy would benefit me? Are there any side effects?

Glossary

acupressure
Uses gentle pressure on specific points of the body to promote wellbeing and relaxation.

acupuncture
A Chinese medicine in which fine, sterile needles are inserted into specific body points to reduce physical or emotional symptoms.

Alexander technique
A method of realigning posture.

allied health professional
A university-qualified professional who works in a health care team to support medical care. Examples include psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, nurse practitioners, physiotherapists and dietitians.

alternative therapy
Therapies used instead of conventional treatment, often hoping to provide a cure.

anecdotal reports
Based on personal experience that has not been scientifically tested.

aromatherapy
The practice of using essential oils from plants for benefits, such as improving mood and physical wellbeing.

art therapy
Creating art and discussing it with a therapist to help people to express their feelings.

Ayurvedic medicine
An ancient Indian system of medicine that seeks to balance the body's systems through diet, herbal remedies, massage, meditation and yoga.

biochemical function
The way the body works internally. Medicines, including drugs, herbs and dietary supplements, affect internal functioning, just as food does.

body-based practices (bodywork)
A range of therapies that involve touching the body or the area surrounding the body.

botanical medicine
See herbal medicine.

Bowen therapy
A bodywork technique involving light hand movements over the body to release tension.

bush medicine
Remedies or healing traditionally used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

cannabinoid
A chemical in marijuana that acts on certain cells in the body. The main active ingredient is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

cannabis
Dried leaves and flowering tops of the cannabis plant. It contains active chemicals called cannabinoids.

chemotherapy
A cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells or slow their growth.

Chinese herbal medicine
The use of herbs originating from China to help strengthen vitality, overcome illness and restore balance.

Chinese medicine
A broad system of holistic health care originating in China, which spread across East Asia over centuries and has become increasingly practised worldwide in the modern era. It includes therapies such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, acupressure, qi gong and tai chi. It is based on the belief that vital energy known as qi flows through the body's meridians (channels or pathways). The aim is to maintain a person's spiritual, emotional and physical health in balance.

clinical trial
A research study that tests new approaches to prevention, screening, diagnosis or treatment, to see if they are better than current approaches.

coffee enema
An unproven, alternative therapy that involves inserting coffee into the anus to open the bowels and cleanse the colon. It claims to remove toxins from the body but can be dangerous if used excessively.

cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)
A common type of counselling that helps people change how they respond to negative situations or emotions by identifying unhelpful thoughts and behaviours.

complementary therapy
Therapies used in conjunction with or alongside conventional medical treatments to manage the physical and emotional impact of cancer.

conventional cancer treatment
Scientifically proven treatments for cancer, including surgery, radiation therapy, hormone therapy and drug therapies such as chemotherapy and immunotherapy, as well as other pharmaceutical medicines and interventions.

counselling
A process of talking through personal issues with a trained professional to help you explore options and develop strategies.

dietary or nutritional supplement
Nourishment given to increase the nutritional intake of kilojoules/calories (energy), vitamins and minerals.

dietitian
A university-qualified health professional who supports and educates people about nutrition and diet. Also known as accredited practising dietitian (APD).

eastern medicine
A broad term for therapies that originated in some Asian countries. These therapies are generally not based on scientific evidence but have been used for centuries.

energy (kilojoules or calories)
Energy is counted in kilojoules or calories and provides fuel for daily activities. Energy is obtained from food and drink.

essential oil
Aromatic oil extracted from different parts of a plant, such as seeds, bark, flowers and leaves.

evidence-based medicine
An approach to health care where decisions are made by integrating the best available research evidence with a clinician's expertise and the patient's values and preferences.

exercise physiologist
A university-qualified professional who specialises in using exercise as medicine, particularly for people with medical conditions. Also known as accredited exercise physiologist (AEP).

Feldenkrais method
A system of gentle movements that encourage self-awareness to improve movement and posture.

flower remedies
Natural medicines extracted from flowers and diluted so that no active ingredient remains. Also known as flower essences.

functional medicine
A patient-centred, science-based approach that focuses on the root causes of illness, rather than treating symptoms. It integrates conventional medical practices with evidence-based complementary therapies, aiming to restore health by considering the whole person, including health, lifestyle, environment and emotional wellbeing.

Gerson therapy/diet
An alternative nutritional therapy that can be dangerous. It claims to detoxify the body using a diet of fresh fruit and vegetable juices and coffee enemas.

guided imagery
A type of meditation where you imagine a series of scenes that help to promote healing thoughts, with the aim of achieving peace and relaxation.

healing touch
The use of soft touch or passing hands over the body. It claims to restore harmony and balance by working with the flow of vital energy in the body.

herb
A part of a plant, such as leaves, flowers, roots or berries, used for food, medicine or aromatic oil.

herbal medicine
Plants and plant extracts, that are taken by mouth or used on the body, to promote overall health. May also be called western herbal medicine or botanical medicine.

holistic care
Care of the whole person. It can include different types of therapies and services to ensure that a person's physical, emotional, spiritual and practical needs are met.

homeopathy
Based on the idea of "like cures like". It claims to treat disease with very small amounts of natural substances that in larger amounts would produce symptoms of the disease.

hormone therapy
A treatment that blocks the body's natural hormones, which sometimes help cancer cells grow. It may be used when the cancer is growing in response to hormones.

hypnotherapy
A type of deep relaxation. The practitioner induces a deeply relaxed state to allow the patient's subconscious (inner) mind to communicate thoughts with their conscious (aware) mind.

immunotherapy
A type of drug treatment that uses the body's own immune system to fight cancer.

infusion (herbal)
A herbal remedy made by putting dried herbs in hot or boiling water. Also called herbal tea.

integrative oncology
The combined use of evidence-based complementary therapies and conventional medicine to holistically care for cancer patients. Also known as integrative medicine.

lifestyle factors
These help give a picture of your health and wellbeing. May include what you eat and drink; how much you exercise; your job and its risks; relationships; stress and pressures in your life; and whether you smoke.

lymph
A clear fluid that circulates around the body through the lymphatic system, carrying cells that fight infection.

lymphatic drainage
Specialised massage designed to stimulate the flow of lymph in the body's tissues.

lymphatic system
A network of vessels, nodes and organs that removes excess fluid from tissues, absorbs fatty acids, transports fat and produces immune cells.

lymphoedema
Swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. This happens when lymph vessels or nodes can't drain properly because they have been removed or damaged.

massage
A bodywork therapy in which muscles are stimulated, stretched and relaxed through specialised pressure.

medicinal cannabis
Cannabis, also called marijuana, that is prescribed for medical use.

meditation
A mind–body technique that focuses on breathing, learning to still the mind, and thinking only about the present.

meridian
In Chinese medicine this is an invisible energy channel in the body. The body is believed to have meridians through which vital energy called qi flows to keep people balanced and healthy.

mind–body techniques
Techniques that help people address emotional issues and other problems that have a mental component, such as anxiety, depression, stress and pain.

mindfulness
The quality of being present and fully engaged in the present moment ("mindful").

mineral oil
A highly refined colourless and odourless oil used by some massage therapists.

minerals
Components of food that are needed to keep the body healthy (e.g. iron, zinc, calcium).

naturopathic nutrition
A form of nutrition based on the principles of naturopathy. Focuses on using whole foods and avoiding artificial chemicals to improve digestion and absorption of nutrients.

naturopathy
A holistic system of health care incorporating diet, bodywork and herbal medicine to stimulate the body's own healing ability.

needles/press needles
Fine, sterile needles inserted into the body during acupuncture. Press needles are like studs, which are covered with tape to help them stay in place.

nutrition
The process of eating and digesting the food the body needs.

oncologist
A doctor who specialises in the study and treatment of cancer.

palliative care
The holistic care of people who have a life-limiting illness, their families and carers. It aims to maintain quality of life by addressing physical, emotional, cultural, social and spiritual needs. Complementary therapy is often used in palliative care.

peripheral neuropathy
Weakness, numbness, tingling or pain, usually in the hands and feet, caused by damage to the nerves that are located away from the brain and spinal cord (peripheral nerves). This damage can be a side effect of chemotherapy.

physiotherapist
A university-qualified health professional who uses physical methods, such as massage and exercise, to help restore movement and mobility, and prevent further injury.

Pilates
A system of exercises that increases awareness of muscles in the body to improve breathing, core strength and posture.

primary cancer
The original cancer. Cells from the primary cancer may break away and be carried to other parts of the body, where secondary cancers may form.

qi
Vital energy or force. Pronounced “chee” and sometimes spelt “chi”.

qi gong
A form of movement therapy from Chinese medicine. Pronounced “chee goong”.

qualified practitioner
Holds formal qualifications in the specific therapy or medicine they practise (e.g., naturopathy, acupuncture, homeopathy).

quality of life
Your comfort and satisfaction, based on how well your physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, social and financial needs are met within the limitations of your health and personal circumstances.

radiation therapy
The use of targeted radiation to kill or damage cancer cells so they cannot grow, multiply or spread. Also called radiotherapy.

reflexology
A type of massage of areas on the hands and feet known as “reflex points”. These points are believed to correspond with the body’s internal organs and systems. It uses gentle pressure on these points.

reiki
A system of light or no-touch movements. It claims to turn blocked negative energy into positive energy.

relaxation (relaxation techniques)
Different techniques that are used to help reduce muscle tension and emotional stress. Examples include relaxation, meditation and guided imagery.

resistance training (strength training)
A type of exercise using free weights, special elastic resistance bands, medicine balls, weight machines or your own body weight to help strengthen muscles.

scientific evidence
Rigorous testing to prove something works or does not work. Clinical trials are a form of scientific evidence.

side effect
Unintended effect of a drug, herb or other treatment. Most side effects can be managed.

spiritual practices (spirituality)
Connection with a higher being or one’s inner self, which often brings comfort and understanding about the world, one’s place in it and the reasons behind life’s challenges.

supportive care
All forms of care and support that aim to improve the quality of life of people living with cancer, their family and carers.

tai chi
Part of Chinese medicine, this exercise technique incorporates coordinated gentle body movements, breathing techniques and meditation to create stability in the body.

traditional healing practices/medicine
A term used by complementary therapists to mean old systems of medicine that are passed down through the ages. Medical practitioners may use the term to mean mainstream (conventional) medicine that is practised in hospitals today.

vital energy/force
The life force within the body believed to contribute to people’s health and wellbeing. It is stimulated by nourishing foods or medicines, mind–body techniques and body-based practices.

vitamins
Essential substances found in food. The body needs vitamins to burn energy, repair tissue, assist metabolism and fight infection.

western herbal medicine
The use of herbs – mainly from Europe – to correct imbalances in the body and bring it back into a state of health. Herbalists prepare individual blends of herbs to address a range of symptoms.

whole medical systems
Complete systems of theory and practice that have evolved in different cultures. Includes Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, homeopathy and naturopathy.

Yin and Yang
An ancient Chinese philosophical concept of balance that underpins Chinese medicine. It describes the idea that everything is made up of 2 opposite yet complementary forces that must remain in harmony. Yin is associated with qualities such as coolness, rest and darkness, while Yang represents heat, activity and light.

yoga
An exercise technique originating from India that focuses on breathing, stretching, strengthening and relaxation. There are many different types of yoga.

Can't find a word here?

For more cancer-related words, visit:

- cancercouncil.com.au/words
- cancervic.org.au/glossary.

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For more information about the studies and evidence used in preparing this booklet, visit cancercouncil.com.au and search for “complementary therapies”.

Notes

How you can help

At Cancer Council, we're dedicated to improving cancer control. As well as funding millions of dollars in cancer research every year, we advocate for the highest quality care for cancer patients and their families. We create cancer-smart communities by educating people about cancer, its prevention and early detection. We offer a range of practical and support services for people and families affected by cancer. All these programs would not be possible without community support, great and small.

Join a Cancer Council event: Join one of our community fundraising events such as Daffodil Day, Australia's Biggest Morning Tea, Relay For Life, Girls' Night In and other Pink events, or hold your own fundraiser or become a volunteer.

Make a donation: Any gift, large or small, makes a meaningful contribution to our work in supporting people with cancer and their families now and in the future.

Buy Cancer Council sun protection products: Every purchase helps you prevent cancer and contribute financially to our goals.

Help us speak out for a cancer-smart community: We are a leading advocate for cancer prevention and improved patient services. You can help us speak out on important cancer issues and help us improve cancer awareness by living and promoting a cancer-smart lifestyle.

Join a research study: Cancer Council funds and carries out research investigating the causes, management, outcomes and impacts of different cancers. You may be able to join a study.

To find out more about how you, your family and friends can help, please call your local Cancer Council.

Cancer Council 13 11 20

Being diagnosed with cancer can be overwhelming. At Cancer Council, we understand it isn't just about the treatment or prognosis. Having cancer affects the way you live, work and think. It can also affect our most important relationships.

When disruption and change happen in our lives, talking to someone who understands can make a big difference. Cancer Council has been providing information and support to people affected by cancer for over 50 years.

Calling 13 11 20 gives you access to trustworthy information that is relevant to you. Our experienced health professionals are available to answer your questions and link you to services in your area, such as transport, accommodation and home help. We can also help with other matters, such as legal and financial advice.

If you are finding it hard to navigate through the health care system, or just need someone to listen to your immediate concerns, call 13 11 20 and find out how we can support you, your family and friends.

TIS TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING SERVICE

If you need information in a language other than English, an interpreting service is available. Call 131 450.

National Relay Service

If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment, you can contact us through the National Relay Service. accesshub.gov.au

Cancer Council services and programs vary in each area.
13 11 20 is charged at a local call rate throughout Australia (except from mobiles).

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For information & support
on cancer-related issues,
call Cancer Council 13 11 20

Visit your local Cancer Council website

Cancer Council ACT
actcancer.org

Cancer Council NSW
cancercouncil.com.au

Cancer Council NT
cancer.org.au/nt

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To support Cancer Council, call your local Cancer Council or visit your local website.

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