



SAGE TEA NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE LEARNING CENTER

The Naturopathic Treatment Approach to Cancer

Disclosure of the Position of the American Cancer Society

“Naturopathic Medicine”

Description

“Naturopathic medicine is a complete alternative care system that uses a wide range of approaches such as nutrition, herbs, manipulation of the body, exercise, stress reduction, and acupuncture. Parts of naturopathy are sometimes used as complementary therapy along with mainstream medicine. Naturopathic medicine is a holistic approach (meaning it is intended to treat the whole person) that tries to enlist the healing power of the body and nature to fight disease.

Overview

Available scientific evidence does not support claims that naturopathic medicine can cure cancer or any other disease, since virtually no studies on naturopathy as a whole have been published. The individual methods used by naturopathic medicine vary in their effectiveness. Homeopathy, for instance, has been shown in studies to be of little value. Other naturopathic methods have been shown to help in prevention and symptom management. Examples include diet for lowering the risk of severe illnesses such as heart disease and cancer and counseling, relaxation, and herbs to help reduce anxiety.

How is it promoted for use?

Supporters claim that naturopathic medicine uses the healing power of nature to maintain and restore health. Their goal is to create a healthy environment inside and outside the body so that the body can heal itself. Supporters claim naturopathic medicine prevents illness because people are taught healthy diets and lifestyles to avoid disease. Treatment is focused on what the practitioner identifies as the cause of disease, rather than on the symptoms.

Naturopathic medicine is promoted for the treatment of conditions such as migraine headaches, chronic lower back pain, enlarged prostate, menopause, AIDS, cancer, and other conditions. Practitioners claim to use more natural methods to try and strengthen the body to help it heal and keep it healthy. They believe that this type of care causes fewer side effects and costs less than conventional treatment. However, practitioners often refer complex cases or people needing major treatment for mainstream medical care.

What does it involve?

There are 3 kinds of practitioners who may offer naturopathic treatment. *Naturopathic doctors* (NDs, who may also call themselves naturopathic physicians) have usually had four years of study in a school of naturopathy. The second group often calls themselves *naturopaths*, although some also call themselves naturopathic doctors. Many naturopaths are self-taught or were apprenticed to another naturopath. They may focus on one or just a few naturopathic methods. The third group consists of chiropractors, massage therapists, dentists, nurses, nutritionists, or doctors who practice under a professional license but include some naturopathic methods in their practice. They may have studied or read on their own or taken courses on naturopathic methods. They use these methods along with their usual treatments.

Naturopathic doctors may diagnose illness using some of the same methods used in conventional medicine. They use x-rays, laboratory tests, and physical exams to try to identify the problem. However, naturopathic treatment does not generally use drugs, radiation therapy, or major surgery.

Naturopathic medicine uses many different techniques and methods. Practitioners act mostly as teachers. They decide how to treat a particular patient based on case history, observation, medical records, and previous experience. Naturopathic treatment can include nutritional medicine and fasting; herbs, minerals, and vitamins; homeopathy; Chinese medicine; manipulation of muscles, the spine, and other bones; acupuncture; counseling and hypnotherapy; massage; colonics (enemas); hydrotherapy, heat, and cold applications; therapeutic exercise; and some minor surgery. For more information about some of the treatments involved in naturopathic medicine, see our documents, [Acupuncture](#), [Homeopathy](#), [Hypnosis](#), [Colon Therapy](#), and the information on herbs, vitamins, and minerals.

Counseling or behavioral medicine is an important part of naturopathic medicine. Practitioners are usually trained in counseling, biofeedback, stress reduction, and other means to improve mental health (see our documents, [Biofeedback](#) and [Psychotherapy](#)). They may also use other unproven techniques such as ozone therapy for people with cancer and AIDS. These treatments have shown no benefit in curing cancer.

Treatment by naturopathic doctors is not covered by many insurance policies, including those offered through Medicare and Tricare. A few states require that treatment by licensed naturopathic doctors be covered by insurance companies. States that license naturopathic doctors as primary care providers may provide coverage on Medicaid programs.

What is the history behind it?

Some of the techniques used by naturopathic medicine began thousands of years ago, but naturopathic medicine started as a named practice in the late 1800s. Sebastian Kneipp, a German priest, opened a water cure center. Around that same time, a “nature

cure” approach in Austria was using food, light, air, and herbs to treat illness. Later, a student of Kneipp’s, Benedict Lust, opened a water cure institute in New York that used Kneipp’s drugless therapies. Lust went on to acquire degrees in osteopathy and chiropractic, homeopathic, and eclectic medicine. In 1902, Lust purchased the rights to the name naturopathic medicine from another Kneipp student and opened the first school of naturopathy in the United States.

By the early 1900s, there were more than twenty schools of naturopathic medicine. With the advances in conventional medicine after World War II, however, interest in naturopathy began to decline. It resurged in the mid-1950s, when the National College of Naturopathic Medicine was founded in Portland, Oregon. In 1968, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued a report stating that the educational programs for practitioners of naturopathic medicine did not adequately prepare them to make accurate diagnoses or treatment decisions. The report also concluded that naturopathic medicine was not based on widely accepted scientific principles of health, disease, and health care.

The American Naturopathic Medical Association was founded in 1981 and today reports a membership of approximately 4,000 people worldwide. The Council on Naturopathic Medical Education (CNME) was approved by the U.S. Secretary of Education in 1987 as an accrediting body for full-time schools. It lost its certification in 2001, but regained it in 2003.

Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine (ND or NMD) degrees are offered by four-year graduate-level programs. Naturopathic doctors take some basic science courses and courses on disease prevention, wellness, clinical nutrition, acupuncture, homeopathic medicine, botanical medicine, psychology, and counseling. Naturopathic doctors do not receive residency training. As of this writing, there are 7 accredited ND programs in the United States. Naturopathic doctors are licensed in 16 states and Washington DC. Some ND degrees are available through online schools or distance learning programs, which are typically not accredited. Graduates of these programs are not eligible for state licensure.

What is the evidence?

Available scientific evidence does not support claims that naturopathic medicine is effective for most health problems. Most of the claims of effectiveness are based on individual cases, medical records, and summaries of practitioners’ clinical experiences.

One clinical study that looked at treatment of ear pain in children tested the effectiveness of naturopathic ear drops, anesthetic ear drops, and oral antibiotics. The pain improved over 3 days in all groups, and the naturopathic drops were slightly more effective than the anesthetic drops. Antibiotics were not helpful and may have slowed recovery, as explained by other studies and the guidelines of most conventional medical groups, which do not recommend antibiotics for uncomplicated ear pain.

A Canadian study looked at anxiety in adults and found that a 12-week course of psychotherapy helped reduce anxiety, but did not help as much as a multi-pronged naturopathic approach. Of note, the psychotherapy was given by a person whose training and methods were not outlined in the study report and, like the ear pain study, may not have met the usual standards of mainstream care for the comparison group. The groups were not followed beyond 12 weeks to see if the effects lasted.

Naturopathic medicine includes many methods, which have been shown to vary in effectiveness. Available scientific evidence looking at methods such as homeopathy and colonic irrigation has not shown them to be helpful for cancer or any other disease. Other aspects of naturopathic medicine, like healthy nutrition, have been shown to lower the risk of illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Some aspects of naturopathic medicine may be useful when used along with conventional medical treatment.

Are there any possible problems or complications?

Substances used in alternative medical practices may have not been thoroughly tested to find out how they interact with medicines, foods, or dietary supplements. Even though some reports of interactions and harmful effects may be published, full studies of interactions and effects are not often available. There may also be lesser-known methods used, other than the ones discussed here, which could potentially cause harm. Because of these limitations, any information on ill effects below should be considered incomplete.

Excessive fasting, dietary restrictions, or use of enemas, which are sometimes components of naturopathic treatment, may be dangerous. Naturopathic treatment may involve taking unregulated herbs, some of which may have impurities and/or harmful effects. In addition, the potential interactions between herbal preparations and conventional drugs and other herbs should be considered. Some of these combinations may be dangerous. Always tell your doctor and pharmacist about any herbs you are taking.

The US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has published the following precautions about naturopathy:

- Although some of the individual therapies used in naturopathy have been studied for efficacy and safety, naturopathy as a general approach to health care has not been widely researched.
- “Natural” does not necessarily mean “safe.” Some therapies used in naturopathy, such as herbal supplements and restrictive or unconventional diets, have the potential to be harmful if not used under the direction of a well-trained practitioner.
- Some beliefs and approaches of naturopathic practitioners are not consistent with [science], and their safety may not be supported by scientific evidence. For example, some practitioners may not recommend childhood vaccinations. The benefits of vaccination in preventing illness and death have been repeatedly proven and greatly outweigh the risks.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary health practices [and all the medicines, herbs, or supplements] you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

If you are visiting a naturopath, be sure you know what kind of training and education the person has. In states that do not license naturopathic doctors, anyone can use the title. You may also want to ask how they refer a person out if they have an emergency or life-threatening illness that the naturopath can't manage.

Relying on this type of treatment alone and avoiding or delaying conventional medical care for cancer may have serious health consequences.

To learn more

More information from your American Cancer Society

The following information on complementary and alternative therapies may also be helpful to you. These materials may be found on our Web site (www.cancer.org) or ordered from our toll-free number (1-800-ACS-2345).

[Dietary Supplements: What Is Safe?](#)

The ACS Operational Statement on Complementary and Alternative Methods of Cancer Management

[Complementary and Alternative Methods and Cancer](#)

[Placebo Effect](#)

[Learning About New Ways to Treat Cancer](#)

[Learning About New Ways to Prevent Cancer](#)

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Note: This information may not cover all possible claims, uses, actions, precautions, side effects or interactions. It is not intended as medical advice, and should not be relied upon as a substitute for consultation with your doctor, who is familiar with your medical situation. ”

From The American Cancer Society. Learn more at:

<http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/complementaryandalternativemedicine/mindbodyandspirit/naturopathic-medicine>