

Conventional *vs.* Alternative *Medicine*

Myths, Facts, and Drawbacks

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Alternative medicines in the U.S. first flourished in the 1990s. The U.S. government established the Office of Alternative Medicine, now the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, in 1992 as a bureau within the National Institute of Health. The Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine has also existed since 1995. The integration of alternative medicine into official channels like governmental agencies and the adoption of scientific methods in peer reviewed publications show the projected longevity of the alternative medicine movement. Furthermore, professionals in the alternative medicine industry have been making a push to utilize traditional scientific methods to develop credibility in the mainstream.

Alternative medicine includes a number of practices from various cultures, many of which originate in South and East Asia. It includes practices such as yoga, acupuncture, herbalism, meditation, homeopathy, and chiropractic care. It can also include dietary supplements and vitamins, which are more commonly integrated into standard health care protocols, yet are often purchased and taken without the supervision of trained medical professionals.

Alternative medicines are thought to be more natural and holistic than conventionally prescribed medicines. They are marketed as having fewer side effects than conventional drugs but are of questionable effectiveness in the scientific field.

Different alternative medicine methods receive varied levels of respect among followers and health care professionals. While methods like chiropractic care and vitamin supplements are commonly folded into the mainstream medical world, being often recommended by medical doctors, other alternative medicines like herbalism and energy therapy are met with skepticism.

Alternative health services are increasingly popular in the West. Populations most likely to opt for alternative or complementary health services are those with higher education levels and long-lasting or chronic health conditions. People who have anxiety, back problems, chronic pain, and urinary tract problems are more likely to seek alternative health care than those who do not have these issues. Young people are also picking up alternative medicines in an attempt to stave off illness presently and in old age. Vitamins and supplements as well as herbal and practical therapies have boomed among Millennials. The Fiscal Times reported earlier this year that Millennials were one of the highest users of alternative medicines, asserting that 11 percent of Millennials used homeopathic medicine in 2013, compared to only six percent of Baby Boomers and seven percent of Generation X.

Distrust of doctors and pharmaceutical companies are typically thought to be the primary reason for the popularity of alternative medicines among consumers. Yet, a study done by the Journal of American Medical Association seems to suggest otherwise, stating:

"Dissatisfaction with conventional medicine did not predict use of alternative medicine. Only 4.4% of those surveyed reported relying primarily on alternative therapies...The majority of alternative medicine users appear to be doing so not so much as a result of being dissatisfied with conventional medicine but largely because they find these health care alternatives to be more congruent with their own values, beliefs, and philosophical orientations toward health and life."



Alternative and complementary medicines are a market worth billions, but how many billions is up for debate. The National Institute of Health calculates alternative health practices to be a \$9 billion market, while the Fiscal Times calls it a \$32 billion dollar industry. One problem in determining the financial value of alternative medicines lies in the ambiguity of what alternative medicine is. While some limit the purview of alternative health care to herbal and spiritual solutions, others broadened it to include vitamin and dietary supplements.

For patients looking for alternative health care options, payment for services will likely be out-of-pocket. Though alternative medicines are not likely to edge out conventional pharmaceuticals and their effectiveness is generally poorly understood, the popularity of these options remains constant with about a third of adult Americans reporting regular use of alternative medicine. According to the recent National Health Interview Survey conducted by the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, cancer survivors are estimated to have spent \$9 billion dollars in 2012 on alternative medicine methods, making them a total of seven percent of the health cost incurred by cancer patients. Over \$1.4 billion was spent on herbal supplements alone. With so much money being churned out for alternative health care solutions the question arises... When will health insurance companies begin covering some of these costs?

Well, it's already happening. Many insurance programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, already cover some alternative medicines and treatments. One of the most respected and longest running alternative health care options is chiropractic care. Coverage for chiropractic care, and other tactile options like massage, is not implausible. Though the practice of chiropractic care began as a spiritual profession, with theories of innate intelligence and universal force, modern-day chiropractic care seldom includes these original precepts. While it is unlikely alternative medicine practices, such as energy healing, will soon see the transformation that chiropractic care has seen, other relatively new alternative medicines are penetrating the mainstream and therefore closer to achieving insurance coverage.

As stated, many doctors and scientists express skepticism in respect to products and practices that are marketed as alternative medicines. Lawmakers are also concerned about the lack of regulation of alternative medicines, because some of these practices do not fall under the purview of regulatory bodies such as the FDA. Dietary supplements have been one such source of unease for regulators and health care professionals, as some supplements have been known to cause undesirable side effects

or restrict the efficiency of prescription drugs. This has been documented in the use of St. John's wort, an herbal supplement that has been shown to increase liver function, causing medications such as contraceptive drugs, HIV treatments, or anxiety drugs to be metabolized quicker. Other concerns include the effectiveness of alternative therapies. Doctors and scientists cite the lack of scientific evidence as a hindrance to alternative techniques gaining credibility with the scientific community. The potential for fraud should also be a concern for consumers attempting to navigate the under-regulated field of alternative medicines.

Conversely, many doctors and hospitals do incorporate alternative and complementary medicine into their services. According to the Journal of the American Medical Association:

"...studies in the United States and abroad support the prevalent use of alternative health care. For example, a 1994 survey of physicians from a wide array of medical specialties (in Washington State, New Mexico, and Israel) revealed that more than 60 percent recommended alternative therapies to their patients at least once in the preceding year, while 38 percent had done so in the previous month. Forty-seven percent of these physicians also reported using alternative therapies themselves, while 23 percent incorporated them into their practices."

The shift between "alternative" and "conventional" is a theme repeated throughout history. As the methods that are considered controversial today make their way into the realm of standard practice, consumers should keep in mind that some will fail the test of time and despite the numerous resources at their disposal health is a personal enterprise. ◀