Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM): CAM refers to medical products or practices that are not usually part of standard U.S. medical school curriculum or care provided by doctors of medicine and osteopathy, and their allied healthcare professionals, who practice conventional U.S. (Western - allopathic) medicine. Complementary medicine means non-standard treatments are used with standard ones. Alternative medicine means non-standard treatments are used instead of standard ones. Integrative medicine practiced by MDs or DOs combines conventional allopathic medicine with those CAM approaches which are supported as being safe and effective, based on high quality studies.

Variations or lack of information on efficacy, and wide variations in training requirements and licensure state-to-state related to CAM, raise issues for insurance companies when reviewing files for appropriate care or treatment clauses of disability plans. Each plan needs to specify what “appropriate care or treatment” means in terms of types of treatments and/or providers. . Many medical insurance plans don’t cover most CAM therapies. However, people use them and often pay out-of-pocket. In 2007 a U.S. survey found that CAM products, providers, and treatments account for about $34 billion in health expenditures.

Each CAM approach has its proponents. Claims of benefits can sound promising. However, rigorous scientific research on safety and efficacy, particularly compared to conventional treatments, is often lacking. Some CAM practices are under study now. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is a branch of the U.S. National Institutes of Health. Its mission is to define, through rigorous scientific investigation, the usefulness and safety of CAM interventions and their roles in improving health and health care. NCCAM provides on-line resources for listings about CAM, training, licensing of practitioners, and data on effectiveness. Some general areas of CAM include:

Natural products, including vitamins, herbs, probiotics in food and dietary supplements (including fish oil – omega 3s). Non-vitamin/non-mineral natural products are the most popular CAM. Usual doses of multivitamins to meet minimum daily requirements, therapeutic iron for iron deficiency, calcium for bone health, and fluoride for tooth health are not considered part of CAM.

Mind body medicine focuses on using the mind to affect the body and enhance health. These CAM practices include meditation, yoga, tai chi, relaxation techniques, deep breathing, hypnotherapy, guided imagery, biofeedback and mindfulness. Qi gong, acupuncture, and other traditional Chinese medicine approaches are included. Ayurvedic medicine (an ancient medical system from India), like traditional Chinese medicine, aims to integrate and balance mind, body, and spirit. It emphasizes mind-body approaches, and universal interconnectedness of all things. These medical systems may use herbs, vitamins, minerals, tonics, message, physical activity, stretching, breathing exercises, cleansing enemas, special diets, mental nurturing, and other modalities thought to restore balance and harmony.

Movement therapies aim to promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. These approaches include Alexander technique, Feldenkrais method, Pilates, and Rolffing.

Manipulative and body-based practices focus on structures of body systems. These include spinal manipulation, chiropractic, massage therapy, and acupuncture. These methods aim to alleviate pain, address alignment problems, improve function, and support the body’s natural ability to heal itself.

Energy medicine relates to addressing imbalances in putative and veritable energies. Approaches to putative (not yet measured) energies in traditional Chinese medicine and in yogic and tantric south Asian concepts of Chakras, ki, and life-force energies, include acupuncture, qi gong, and Reiki (“hand on healing”). Those related to veritable (measurable) energies include magnet therapy and light therapy.

Naturopathy aims to support the body’s inherent ability to maintain and restore health, by using treatments with the most natural products and least invasive techniques. The approach emphasizes healing power of nature on physical and non-physical aspects of health. Practices may include some traditional and modern approaches to herbs, nutritional guidance, restrictive diets, exercise, massage, and products considered to have cleansing effects. Education, personal responsibility, lifestyle counseling, and preventive efforts are usually emphasized.

Homeopathy is based on claims that disease can be cured by a substance that produces similar symptoms in healthy people, and that lower doses of a substance have more effect. Treatments sometimes involve repeated dilutions of a substance so that the original substance is not present in the treatment dose. A concept that diluted water retains a memory of the treatment substance is emphasized. Some treatments are not highly diluted, and some are given in the form of tablets, sugar pellets, ointments, drops, creams, and gels. Remedies are developed from plants, animals, or minerals. Homeopathic approaches may be used in naturopathy and other CAM approaches.

Other CAMs include hydrotherapy, chelation therapy for conditions other than lead poisoning and similar metal toxicities, and some other non-conventional uses of medication, and use of chemicals and other treatments for unconfirmed benefits.

Conclusions: There are a wide variety of CAMs available. Some overlap the general categories listed above. There is limited information on effectiveness and safety of many treatments. Products being natural does not assure safety or effectiveness. Some CAM natural products can be toxic or interfere with beneficial effects of conventional medications a doctor may prescribe. Some CAM practitioners advise against conventional childhood vaccinations, which results in risks to health. Some remedies are difficult to study scientifically, or to distinguish from effects expected from placebo treatments. Others are more easily studied. NCCAM’s on-line resources are useful for identifying effective CAM treatment for specific conditions. Western (allopathic) medicine, as typically practiced in the U.S., also has a long history of using approaches not proven scientifically to be effective (e.g., blood-letting, fever-induction, sweating/purging). However, it also developed a history of scientifically testing many approaches and treatments to confirm efficacy (evidence-based medicine). Such scrutiny applied to CAM is helping to identify useful versus non-useful treatments. Lack of scientific testing does not mean treatments are effective or ineffective, or that they are safe or harmful.

References: