

More Americans are Turning to Complimentary and Alternative Medicine

Complementary and alternative medicine is becoming more mainstream in the United States. According to a recently-released 2007 National Health Interview Survey, Americans spent \$33.9 billion out-of-pocket on complementary and alternative medicine each year.

The phrase “complementary and alternative medicine” encompasses a wide variety of treatments, from methods that have been practiced for thousands of years by entire countries, to therapies developed by individuals in the last century.

Generally, complementary and alternative medicine treatment methods are classified in five different areas: medical systems, biologically based practices, body-based and manipulative practices, mind-body practices and energy medicine.

- Medical systems includes the systems of ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy and naturopathy. Ayurvedic medicine originated in India, while naturopathy and homeopathy began in Europe. These systems share similar characteristics, namely the belief that the body can heal itself with the help of spirit, mind and body techniques.
- Biologically based practices include taking vitamins and herbal supplements, prebiotics, probiotics, botanicals, fatty acids, “whole diets” and eating “functional foods.”
- A number of practices fall into the body-based category, such as massage therapy, Alexander technique, Trager bodywork, rolfing and Tui Na. Some methods are very old, while others have only been developed in the last century or so.
- Mind-body medicine therapies include therapies such as yoga, biofeedback, visual imagery and qigong.
- Energy medicine is typically divided into two types: methods that use measurable energy, such as sound and light, and biofields, which haven’t been measured, but are exploited in acupuncture, Qi gong and healing touch. Energy medicine dates back more than 2,000 years in Asia, and increasingly more people are using them in the United States according to recent reports.

Complementary and alternative medicine are basically therapies that are not routinely considered to be part of conventional medicine. Though the effectiveness and usefulness of some complementary and alternative medicine treatments are questioned, not all remain outside the mainstream.

Complementary and alternative medicine accounts for approximately 11.2 percent of total out-of-pocket expenditures (conventional out-of-pocket: \$286.6 billion and complementary and alternative medicine is out-of-pocket: \$33.9 billion) on health care in the United States each year.

The health survey found that approximately 38 percent of adults use some form of complementary and alternative medicine every year and spent approximately \$12 billion on an estimated 354 million yearly visits to complementary and alternative medicine practitioners such as acupuncture therapists, biofeedback and neurofeedback trainers, chiropractors and massage therapists.

According to the survey, biofeedback, guided imagery, meditation, deep breathing exercises and yoga all saw increased usage; there were no changes in the frequency of use of hypnosis and Qi gong; and there were decreases in the use of progressive muscle relaxation, tai chi, and, especially, energy healing therapies. It is clear from this data that Americans are utilizing complementary and alternative medicine treatments-and psychophysiological interventions (i.e., treatments that affect both the mind and the body such as biofeedback and various forms of relaxation therapies)-with increasing frequency.

Reference: Barnes PM, Bloom B, Nahin RL. Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use Among Adults and Children: United States, 2007. National health statistics reports; no 12. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2008. <http://nccam.nih.gov/news/2008/nhsr12.pdf>

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