

## **Alternative or complementary therapies**

More and more rheumatology patients are using “alternative” therapies along with, or instead of, medication prescribed by rheumatologists. These therapies include herbal remedies, nutritional supplements, chiropractic, acupuncture, copper bracelets, and magnets. Patients or parents may be reluctant to tell their physician about their use of such therapies.

You should tell your doctor if your child is taking alternative therapies! The American Academy of Pediatrics, which is the certifying organization for general pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists, does not advocate the medicinal use of herbs for infants or children. Although most pediatric rheumatologists are keeping open minds about herbs and other alternative therapies in general, we know that some of these remedies may be of benefit, some are almost certainly ineffective, and others could cause more harm than good for patients with rheumatologic conditions. In the Division of Rheumatology, we have access to resources written by experts (textbooks and a continuously updated computer database for physicians) that will enable us to find accurate information about most remedies for you.

### **Are alternative remedies effective?**

Most substances or treatments marketed as alternative therapies have not been tested in a scientific manner to show safety and efficacy. Much of the ‘proof’ of efficacy that you will see in the advertisements are based on anecdotal evidence (the stories of a few people who thought their condition improved) or by improperly designed studies. In such circumstances, the placebo effect is not taken into account. The placebo effect is a trick of the unconscious mind – when a person thinks he is doing something that will help his condition, he often feels better.

Accurate scientific trials of medication and other treatments are designed in a particular way in order to avoid this unconscious bias. For a description of how good clinical trials are designed, see the section of this website “**Clinical Research**”. The National Institutes of Health has set up a new Institute to fund the study of herbal and alternative therapies. Hopefully, more real scientific information will be available in the next decade to help patients and physicians accurately evaluate these therapies.

Because nutritional supplements and herbal remedies are not classified as “drugs” in the United States, manufacturers of these products are not required to substantiate effectiveness in the same rigorous way that pharmaceutical companies are. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 prohibits claims of cure, treatment, or prevention of various diseases by these supplements. However, manufacturers are still free to claim that their product does less specific things such as supporting structure or function, energizing, or detoxifying – with no required proof.

Patients and parents should think carefully about claims made in advertisements and on websites – not everything you read is true!. For example, an ineffective remedy may claim to have been proven effective in studies reported in numerous “medical journals,” but these may be journals that are published by the manufacturer of the supplement and/or are not peer reviewed for quality of research. For a description of peer review, see the section of this website on “**Clinical Research.**”

### **Are alternative remedies safe?**

“Natural” does not necessarily mean harmless or beneficial. Although many valuable medications were first discovered in nature (for example, aspirin, colchicine, and digitalis), in excess doses any medication can be harmful. Many known poisons come from plants (for example, curare, yohimbine, and hemlock), and some herbs commonly sold in the U.S. are toxic (for example, cat’s claw, pennyroyal, and comfrey) . Although micronutrients are essential for metabolism, excess amounts can be harmful. Herbs, homeopathic remedies, and micronutrients do not have to meet US Food and Drug Administration quality control standards. Some products have been contaminated with toxic heavy metals, fungi, or bacteria, or are secretly laced with steroids, analgesics, or other drugs to “boost” their effect.

Some herbal and micronutrient therapies should not be used by patients with rheumatic diseases like JRA or lupus. Some herbs are known to interact with the medications used to treat these conditions, and others, especially those which may activate the immune system, have the potential to make autoimmune diseases worse. Some examples of herbs or supplements that may be harmful to patients with rheumatic diseases include Echinacea, alfalfa sprouts, licorice, and zinc.

**Here do I find out more information about alternative therapies?**

Some good articles are listed below:

- Trade Agency Finds Web Slippery with Snake Oil. New York Times June 25, 1999
- Shopping for a "Cure". Arthritis Today, March-April 1999
- Considering the Alternatives? Arthritis Today, November-December 1997
- Herbal Roulette. Consumer Reports, November 1995
- Complications resulting from the usage of Chinese herbal medications containing undeclared prescription drugs, Arthritis and Rheumatism, May 1995.

An excellent new book, The Arthritis Foundation's Guide to Alternative Therapies, may be purchased for \$24.95. See the Arthritis Foundation website ([LINK](#)), or call the Central Ohio Chapter at 614-876-9362 or 888-382-4673.