

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF RHEUMATOLOGY POSITION STATEMENT

SUBJECT: Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Rheumatic Diseases

PRESENTED BY: Committee on Rheumatologic Care

FOR DISTRIBUTION TO: ACR Members, Medical Societies, Allied Health Professional Societies, Arthritis Patients, Managed Care Organizations/Third Party Carriers, National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, NIAMS, National Council Against Health Fraud Arthritis Foundation

POSITIONS

- The American College of Rheumatology (ACR) recognizes the interest in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) by persons with arthritis.
- The ACR believes healthcare providers should be informed about more common CAM modalities such as mind-body interventions, herbal therapy, and nutritional therapy, and should be willing and able to discuss them openly with patients.
- The ACR supports rigorous scientific evaluation of all modalities that can improve outcomes for patients with rheumatic diseases and recommends continued support of the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
- The ACR understands that certain characteristics of some CAM modalities make it difficult or impossible to conduct standard randomized controlled trials. For these modalities, innovative methods of evaluation are needed, as are measures and standards for the generation and interpretation of evidence (1).
- The ACR supports the integration of those modalities proven to be safe and effective by scientifically rigorous clinical trials into clinical practice. The ACR advises caution in the use of modalities not studied scientifically. In the absence of rigorous clinical trials, the ACR recommends advising patients that potential harm can occur from unproven therapies.
- The ACR recommends practitioners be proactive in inquiring about patients' interest and use of CAM.

BACKGROUND

CAM refers to a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices, products, and accompanying theories and beliefs that are not presently considered part of conventional medicine (2). Complementary medicine is used together with conventional medicine while alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine. An integrative approach combines conventional medical therapies and CAM modalities for which there is some high-quality scientific evidence of safety and effectiveness (2).

The use of CAM modalities by patients with musculoskeletal and rheumatic conditions is extremely common. Limiting features of conventional therapies for many conditions in the spectrum of rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases include partial efficacy, side effects, and expense. These limitations may drive patient desire for alternatives. Patients may feel helpless in the face of unpredictable, progressive, and disabling disease and therefore seek therapies that offer more control over their illness (3). Surveys show that approximately 30% of Americans will at some time try complementary or alternative medicine regardless of their disease, education, background, or socioeconomic status (1). Rheumatologic conditions are one of the most common reasons for patients to use CAM therapies (4,5).

Scientific inquiry into little understood or unproven ideas, whether they are from CAM or conventional medical sources, can lead to new information that in turn can lead to improvements in the care of patients with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases. Conversely, the same scientific inquiry can be used to protect patients from unsafe, harmful and expensive CAMs. It is important for health care providers to ask patients about their use of CAM, and it is important for patients to discuss CAM use with their health care team.

The ACR recognizes that interest in CAM is widespread and supports scientific study of potential new therapies such as the research underwritten and coordinated by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Patients with rheumatic or musculoskeletal diseases as well as practitioners seeking information about CAM need guidance and CAM practices themselves need assessment. The ACR believes that a scientific approach to CAM can bring opportunities for patients and providers to incorporate the best options from all sources of care, conventional or otherwise. The challenge is to avoid bias and to approach each possibility with an appropriate degree of skepticism or belief. The ACR supports inquiry into the use of CAM by patients as part of a comprehensive health care evaluation. The ACR believes it is important for health care providers and patients to openly discuss use of CAM modalities along with their potential risks and benefits. Providers should be proactive in inquiring about interest in CAM and referring patients to reliable sources of information such as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, the Arthritis Foundation, or Science-Based Medicine.

REFERENCES

1. Institute of Medicine 2005: complementary and alternative medicine in the United States. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2005.
2. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, NIH, <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health#cvsa>
3. Panush RS, editor. Complementary and alternative therapies for rheumatic diseases. *Rheum Dis Clin North Am* 1999;25:i-xvii789-995;2000;26:i-xx1-197.
4. MacFarlane GJ, Paudyal P, Doherty M, et al. A systematic review of evidence for the effectiveness of practitioner-based complementary and alternative therapies in the management of rheumatic diseases: rheumatoid arthritis. *Rheumatology* 2012;51:1707-13.
5. Rao JK, Kroenke K, Mihaliak KA, Grambow SC, Weinberger M. Rheumatology patients' use of complementary therapies: Results from a one-year longitudinal study. *Arth Care Res* 2003;49:619-25.
6. MacFarlane GJ, Paudyal P, Doherty M, et al. A systematic review of evidence for the effectiveness of practitioner-based complementary and alternative therapies in the management of rheumatic diseases: rheumatoid arthritis. *Rheumatology* 2012;51:1707-13.
7. Phang JK, et al. Complementary and alternative medicine for rheumatic diseases: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 2018;37:143-57.

Additional Resources

- <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health#cvsa>
<http://www.arthritis.org/living-with-arthritis/treatments/natural/>
<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/>