

Use of complementary or alternative medicines and supplements

**A guide for people
with cancer**



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Introduction

'Complementary medicines' or 'alternative medicines' (known as CAM) are products that are sometimes used by patients alongside, or instead of, conventional medical therapies.

When referring to these medicines people may use the term such as 'natural', 'holistic' or 'traditional'. These treatments often contain materials found in nature and can include plants, or parts of plants (e.g. herbs and spices).

There are also alternative medicine systems or beliefs such as 'homeopathy', 'Ayurvedic medicine' or 'traditional Chinese medicine'.

These treatments are commonly used by some people to support their health and wellbeing. Some people may use alternative medicines alongside conventional medicines with the hope of enhancing their treatment success.

Intention of this leaflet

The intention of this leaflet is to provide information that will help you understand some of the risks and benefits of using complementary or alternative medicines during your cancer treatment.

This leaflet aims to address many of the common questions asked by people attending our hospital.

What is a dietary supplement?

Many patients have taken vitamins or other dietary supplements at some point in their life. Dietary supplements can contain vitamins and minerals, herbs or other plant materials, amino acids, enzymes, and many other ingredients.

Some dietary supplements can help you get the right amount of essential nutrients if you don't eat a nutritious variety of foods. However, supplements can't take the place of the variety of foods that are important to a healthy eating routine.

Dietary supplements can come in a variety of forms, including tablets, capsules, gummies, and powders as well as drinks and energy bars.

Popular supplements include vitamins D and B12; minerals like calcium and iron; herbs such as echinacea and garlic; and products like glucosamine, probiotics, and fish oils.



Natural does not mean safe

Complementary and alternative medicines can be sold to the public without approval by the UK medicines regulatory body. A prescription is often not needed to buy them.

In most cases there is little good quality and large-scale evidence for supporting their use in cancer.

In the worst cases, there are medicines that do not work, can be harmful, or could interact negatively with your medicines.

Addressing frequent claims

1. “Herbal products are natural and therefore safe.”

- Herbal or plant-based supplements (such as garlic, ginger, ginkgo biloba, echinacea, and others) are made of plant material, so many of them are sold as “natural” products. However, plants themselves are made up of many chemicals. Even different parts of the same plant can contain different chemicals. Some of these might be helpful, while others might be poisonous or cause allergies in humans.
- Products that are marketed as “all natural” are not always the most helpful ones since they may not be refined to remove potentially harmful chemicals.
- Natural products can also be grown under different conditions (such as in different soils), which might also affect the levels of some chemicals. This can make it harder to control exactly what’s in the final product.

2. “It’s been used for hundreds/thousands of years, so it must work.”

- Knowing that a product has been used in folk or traditional medicine for many years can be helpful, but it is not proof that it works or that it’s safe.
- If small amounts of a plant caused painful or life-threatening side effects right away, it probably wouldn’t have been used for very long. But in the past, scientific methods weren’t used to look for possible long-term side effects. So, if a plant seemed useful over the short term but otherwise increased the risk of a long-term disease (like cancer, heart failure, or kidney failure), that effect likely would not have been noticed.
- Many of these methods were used because they were the best option available at the time, as more effective treatments had not yet been developed.

3. “It can’t hurt to take supplements along with my regular medicines”.

- Some dietary supplements can block or speed up the body’s ability to break down some medicines. This can cause a person to have too much or too little of the medicine in their bloodstream.
- Most medicine companies and producers of herbal supplements do not research possible medicine interactions, so the risks of taking supplements with other medicines are largely unknown.

Talk with your healthcare team about any supplements you are taking or are thinking about taking. In almost all cases we recommend avoiding ANY unprescribed treatment whilst on other cancer treatment.

It is also important to keep in mind that for newer medicines and supplements sometimes interactions may not yet be known and therefore greater care is needed to keep you safe.

Supplements and cancer treatment

Some common reasons patients consider complementary or alternative medicine whilst undergoing cancer treatment are to:

- Help cope with the side effects of cancer treatments, such as nausea, pain and fatigue.
- Comfort and ease the worries of cancer treatment and related stress.
- Feel that they are doing something to help with their own care.
- Try to treat or cure the cancer.

Despite a lot of research into cancer and dietary supplements, **there is not enough evidence to prove that they can help treat cancer or stop it coming back.**

The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) have also recommended that there is no basis for using supplements, at any dose, to prevent cancer.

Some alternative therapies sound promising. But there is no good evidence to support the claims. They can give some people false hope.

Be skeptical of sources that make big claims based on a few people's testimonials or vague references to "scientific proof." The rule "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is" usually applies to such claims. And keep in mind that the makers and sellers of supplements have a financial interest in promoting their products.



Special concerns for people being treated for cancer

- Some dietary supplements can cause skin sensitivity and severe reactions when taken during radiation treatment. If you are getting radiation treatments, talk to your doctors before taking any supplement.
- For people who need surgery, some supplements may react with medicines used during and after surgery or might increase the risk of certain side effects such as bleeding and infection. Others might affect the way the heart and brain work, which might lead to complications during and after surgery. Let your doctor know what supplements you are taking before you have surgery.
- People getting chemotherapy (or other cancer medicines) may be at higher risk for side effects if they take some dietary supplements. Some supplements can interfere with how the body breaks down these drugs, which can make them less effective or increase side effects.

Vitamin and mineral dietary supplements

Vitamins and minerals are important nutrients to help our bodies work properly.

The recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals should be met if you have a varied, healthy and balanced diet. Supplements should not be used as a replacement for a healthy diet. Even a multivitamin supplement with a wide range of nutrients will not contain all the beneficial substances found naturally in foods, such as fibre.

Taking high-dose supplements without medical supervision or advice may be harmful to your health. High doses of one nutrient may affect how the body absorbs other nutrients.

Some people will need supplements for specific problems. For example, you may be prescribed calcium and vitamin D supplements if your treatment may weaken your bones or if a specific deficiency has been identified.

What if I can't eat a normal diet?

Many people have difficulties with their diet during cancer treatment. This is because cancer treatments can reduce your appetite, or cause problems such as a sore mouth, change of taste or difficulty swallowing.

Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble eating or getting the right balance of foods in your diet

When you are not achieving a balanced diet, your doctor or dietician may advise that you take a standard multivitamin and mineral supplement that contains up to 100% of the recommended daily allowances (RDA).

Based on the safe upper levels of vitamin and minerals produced by the Expert Vitamin and Mineral (EVM) group, the following products contain appropriate quantities:

- Boots® General Health A to Z.
- Centrum® Advance Complete A to Zinc.
- Forceval.
- Sanatogen® A to Z Complete.
- Superdrug® A to Z multivitamins and minerals.

Make sure you **do not** exceed the stated dose and **avoid** taking more than one product containing the same vitamin or mineral. Also check that the product does not contain any other ingredients such as herbs or plant extracts, as this would make it unsuitable.

Herbal medicines or plant /animal-based supplements

This section talks about non-vitamin and non-mineral supplements such as herbs, plant extracts, probiotics, and fish oil products.

Supplements may be harmful when taken by themselves, with other substances, or in large doses. For example:

- **Kava kava**, which is a herb that has been used to help with stress and anxiety, may cause liver damage.
- **St. John's Wort**, which some people use for depression, may cause certain cancer drugs to not work as well as they should.



Supplements are not tested for effectiveness or safety in the same way that conventional medicines are. This means that there is a lack of good-quality evidence for their safe use in combination with cancer treatments.

Oxford Cancer recommend that no supplements are taken throughout chemotherapy, or radiotherapy, or around planned surgery – unless prescribed by your cancer clinician.

You should stop a few weeks before starting treatment and wait for a few weeks before considering restarting these.

Some patients may have medicines prescribed by a complementary practitioner such as a herbalist which have been “checked” and told are compatible with cancer treatment. A herbalist is not qualified to determine interaction risk with any cancer treatment, therapy or procedure you are undergoing in hospital. Please remember that they do not have sight of your full treatment plan, including future treatments you may require, and they are very unlikely to be an expert in your cancer.

Supplements with oestrogen-like effects

Some herbal supplements have effects on the body that are similar to the effects of oestrogen. Taking these supplements may affect hormone-sensitive conditions such as some breast, uterine, and ovarian cancers.

Examples of supplements with oestrogenic effects include:

- Red clover.
- Milk thistle.
- Flaxseed.
- Liquorice.
- Isoflavones.
- Ginseng.
- Soya.

Women with hormone-sensitive conditions (such as breast, uterine or ovarian cancers) should avoid oestrogenic supplements.

If you have a hormone-sensitive condition and wish to consider supplements please discuss with your medical team first.

Antioxidants

Antioxidants are natural or man-made substances. They are found in many foods and dietary supplements.

Some people take antioxidants because they think the supplement will protect and repair healthy cells damaged by cancer drugs. **More research is needed to find out if antioxidant supplements are safe and effective** as a complementary therapy when taken with standard cancer treatment.

Antioxidants may help prevent cell damage but **may also stop chemotherapy or radiotherapy from working as well as we expect.**

We advise on the basis of caution that patients should avoid taking antioxidant supplements whilst on anti-cancer treatment, undergoing radiotherapy and/or other treatments for cancer.

Antioxidant supplements may also cause side-effects such as increased levels of liver enzymes which may interfere with your anti-cancer treatment and prevent effective dosing.

Some examples of antioxidants include:

- Co-enzyme Q10.
- Turmeric/curcumin.
- Wheatgrass.
- Spirulina.



Fish oils and omega-3 supplements

We encourage you to eat fish as part of a balanced diet. This includes two portions of fish per week, one portion which is oily.

Fish is an excellent source of protein and many types of fish are also rich in vitamin D and healthy fats like omega-3. Fish oil supplements may be appropriate for certain individuals based on medical conditions, or when oily fish is not in their diet.

Some studies in mouse models have suggested that there could be effects on some anti-cancer agents or cancer responses – both positive and negative effects have been suggested over the years. However, this is very early research. A definitive link between supplementation of fish oil or omega-3 and the effect on anti-cancer treatments, or in patients with cancer, is not fully established or proven.

Oxford Cancer recommend avoiding high-dose fish oil or omega-3 supplements and promote healthy levels of fish consumption as part of a normal diet where possible.

Green, fruit or herbal teas

One to two cups a day of green tea or fruit and herbal teas are unlikely to affect your treatment.

Larger quantities could provide a big enough dose of the ingredients to potentially affect the chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Do not have more than 2 cups of green, fruit or herbal tea per day.

Probiotics

Probiotics contain live bacteria. If your immune system is suppressed by your treatment there is a small risk that probiotics could cause an infection that your body will not be able to fight.

We recommend not taking probiotic products during your cancer treatment unless specifically advised by your cancer clinician to address gut problems.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on the idea that a substance which causes a symptom can also be used to help remove those symptoms. This is sometimes described as “like cures like”. For example, something that can cause vomiting is used to prevent or treat nausea and vomiting.

Homeopathic ideas also state that the more diluted a preparation is, the more powerful it is. This is very different from conventional medicine where a bigger dose of a drug would be expected to have a greater effect.

There has been extensive investigation into the effectiveness of homeopathy. There is no good-quality evidence that homeopathy is an effective treatment for any health condition. The NHS does not support homeopathy-based treatments.

If you still choose to take homeopathy, you should be careful about the strength of the product. The strength of products is labelled with a number, followed by an x or c.

Products of a strength less than 12c or 24x may negatively interact with medicines. You should not take these products during your chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

The numbering system can be confusing. If you are not sure about a product, do not take it without checking with your clinical team.

Counterfeit and substandard medicines

There is a risk that you might buy fake, bad quality or contaminated alternative medicines. This is because these medicines are not regulated in the same way as conventional medicines.

Some websites may appear to be legitimate but are fronted by fake doctors or pharmacists.

Herbal products sold online may also contain banned ingredients and toxic substances.

To keep yourself safe:

- **Use products from reputable sources.**
- **Purchase products from established supply outlets.**
- **Avoid purchasing from social media ads.**
- **Avoid buying medicines manufactured outside of UK regulations.**
- **If in doubt of a medicine's quality – do not take it.**

Reporting side-effects



You can report any side effect or adverse reaction to a medicine using the Yellow Card Scheme run by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA): <https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk>

This can help the MHRA identify new side effects or risks associated with medicines, including herbal remedies.

You should report adverse reactions or side effects if:

- you suspect the side effect or adverse reaction was caused by a conventional medicine or other medicine you were taking.
- the side effect occurs when you're taking more than one medicine or supplement.

Yellow Card reports make a big difference to patient safety. They have been used to identify interactions between St John's wort and other medicines, and to highlight the use of dangerous substances like mercury, lead and arsenic in unlicensed Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicines.

Tell your team

If you do choose to take supplements, please discuss with your clinical team, so they are made aware and can update your records.

It is helpful for your clinical team to have a full list of your medicines, as well as strength of treatment and number of doses you are taking.

Call us straight away if you are feeling unwell or are worried about the side effects of cancer treatments.

Help when feeling unwell

Oncology and Haematology Triage Assessment Team

Telephone: 01865 572 192

Contact us at any time - 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Further information

Please see the details below for more information about supplements.

Cancer Research UK

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Macmillan Cancer Support

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

World Cancer Research Fund UK

Website: www.wcrf-uk.org

Womens Health Concern – Menopause fact sheet

Website: www.womens-health-concern.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/03-WHC-FACTSHEET-Complementary-And-Alternative-Therapies-NOV2023-C.pdf

NHS Eatwell Guide

Website: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide

The Eatwell Guide is also available via web search: “NHS Eatwell”.

If you have specific medicines related questions, or concerns about medicines you have received **from our hospitals**, you can also contact us via:

Medicines Information

Helpline: 01865 228 906

Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm. Between 1.00pm and 2.00pm calls are diverted to a voicemail service.

Email: medicines.information@ouh.nhs.uk

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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