

Advance Practices of Alternative Medicine

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Description

Alternative medicine is any practice that aims to achieve the healing effects of medicine, but which lacks biological plausibility and is untested, untestable, proven ineffective. Complementary medicine (CM), complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), integrated medicine or integrative medicine (IM), and holistic medicine are among much rebranding's of the same phenomenon. Alternative therapies share that they reside outside medical science and rely on pseudoscience. Traditional practices become "alternative" when used outside their original settings without proper scientific explanation and evidence. Frequently used derogatory terms for the alternative are new-age or pseudo, with little distinction from quackery.

In general, the term "alternative therapy" refers to any health treatment not standard in Western medical practice. When used alongside standard medical practices, alternative approaches are referred to as "complementary" medicine.

Some alternative practices are based on theories that contradict the science of how the human body works; others resort to the supernatural or superstitious to explain their effect. In others, the practice is plausibly effective but has too many side effects. Alternative medicine is distinct from scientific medicine, which employs the scientific method to test plausible therapies by way of responsible and ethical clinical trials, producing evidence of either effect or of no effect. Research into alternative therapies often fails to follow proper research protocols (such as placebo-controlled trials, blind experiments, and calculation of prior probability), providing invalid results.

Much of the perceived effect of an alternative practice arises from a belief that it will be effective (the placebo effect), or from the treated condition resolving on its own (the natural course of disease). This is further exacerbated by the tendency to turn to alternative therapies upon the failure of medicine, at which point the condition will be at its worst and most likely to spontaneously improve. In the absence of this bias, especially for diseases that are not expected to get better by themselves such as cancer or HIV infection, multiple studies have shown significantly worse outcomes if patients turn to alternative therapies. While this may be because these patients avoid effective treatment, some alternative therapies are actively harmful (e.g., cyanide poisoning from amygdalin, or the intentional ingestion of hydrogen peroxide) or actively interfere with effective treatments [1-5].

The alternative sector is a highly profitable industry with a strong lobby and faces far less regulation over the use and marketing of unproven treatments. Its marketing often advertises the treatments as being "natural" or "holistic", in comparison to those offered by "big pharma". Billions of dollars have been spent studying alternative medicine, with few or no positive results. Some of the successful practices are only considered alternative under very specific definitions, such as those which include all physical activity under the umbrella of "alternative medicine".

Alternative medicine is the term for medical products and practices that are not part of standard care. Standard care is what medical doctors, doctors of osteopathy, and allied health professionals, such as nurses and physical therapists, practice. Alternative medicine is used in place of standard medical care. An example is treating heart disease with chelation therapy (which seeks to remove excess metals from the blood) instead of using a standard approach. Examples of alternative practices include homeopathy, traditional medicine, chiropractic, and acupuncture. Complementary medicine is different from alternative medicine. Whereas complementary medicine is used together with conventional medicine, alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine. See also complementary medicine, conventional medicine.

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