Become an Informed Consumer of Alternative Medicine

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Are you considering alternative medicine for a health problem? Are you frustrated by a lack of information concerning its safety and standards of care? The decision to use alternative medicine is an important one. Here are some simple steps you can take to help you arrive at the right decision.

Educate Yourself

Take the time to educate yourself about the limitations and benefits of the alternative therapies you are considering. There is sufficient evidence, for example, to support the use of a) acupuncture for chronic musculoskeletal pain, arthritis and headache b) hypnosis for cancer pain and nausea, and the use of c) mind/body techniques such as relaxation and biofeedback for pain, insomnia and anxiety. Self-care approaches, such as meditation and yoga are generally safe. There are many therapies, however, that have little to offer, or might even be harmful to patients. Coffee enemas, ozone therapy and megadoses of vitamins are examples of such therapies.

Understand the Nature of the Health Problem

Make sure you undergo a complete evaluation to arrive at a conventional diagnosis. If a diagnosis cannot be made, the evaluation is equally important because it rules out commonly occurring and well-defined clinical problems. A conventional work up using the latest technology gives the most valuable diagnostic information. It helps identify the nature of the problem. Other methods of diagnosis, such as those used by traditional Chinese medicine and energy healers may be included so long as they are based on the standards of safety and reliability.

Treating a patient with an alternative therapy based just on symptoms without a conventional workup delays diagnosis and is not without risk. I once had a patient who insisted on alternative therapies for her problem of low back pain. The patient had not seen her own doctor. After the work up, she was found to have metastatic cancer of the lower back. Clearly, the use of any alternative therapy alone, in a situation like hers, would have resulted in the loss of valuable time and the opportunity to receive potentially effective treatments.

The risks, limitations and benefits of alternative medicine approaches under consideration should be assessed and discussed with the doctor. The use of herbal supplements requires professional guidance.

Define the Treatment Objectives

Alternative therapies can help with symptoms. The objectives of the treatment plan such should be discussed and understood. Examples of such objectives might include pain control with acupuncture, improvement of psychological function with mind/body techniques such hypnosis or yoga, or even improvement of energy levels with nutritional supplements and physical activity.

Make sure that that the doctor/health care professional providing the alternative medicine communicates with your primary care/treating doctor about the progress you make with the treatments.
Assess the Knowledge and Skills of the Practitioner

Ensure that the practitioner providing care demonstrates adequate knowledge of and skill in the therapies under consideration. Talk to your doctor about the use of alternative medicine. If your doctor is not familiar with the therapy you are considering, have him refer you to another practitioner who is. Doctors trained in complementary and alternative medicine can be located through local hospitals, licensing boards or departments of health.

The demand for alternative therapies is strong and growing. A new evidence-based integrative approach to disease and health management is beginning to emerge. Such an approach makes available to you both conventional and evidence-based alternative modalities that best serve your interest.

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