

Complementary medicine resources for GPs

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It is important to know the best resources for information on complementary and alternative medicines to keep patients fully informed of any possible drug interactions or side effects.



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Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use is common in Australia, with more than half of people in South Australia surveyed in 2004 having used CAMs in the past year.¹ Consumers have unrestricted access to CAMs through supermarkets and health food shops, as well as pharmacies,² and use of CAMs is largely self-initiated.³ Patients tend not to disclose their CAM use to their doctors,¹ which may be due to fear of a negative reaction.⁴

The term CAM encompasses a wide and diverse group of therapies. According to one survey, GPs tend to classify CAMs into three broad groups:⁵

- nonmedicinal and nonmanipulative therapies (e.g. acupuncture, hypnosis, massage) that are generally seen as safe and effective
- medicinal and manipulative therapies (e.g. herbal medicines, chiropractice) that are thought to be potentially more harmful than effective
- esoteric therapies (e.g. reflexology, aromatherapy) that are viewed as being safe but relatively ineffective.

Consumers cite the media as their most commonly used source of information about CAMs, and are unlikely to ask their doctors for this information.⁴ When coupled with the general tendency to not disclose CAM use, this may lead to the potential for unrecognised interactions with conventional medicines. Up to 50% of people use CAMs at the same time as conventional medicines.¹ Also, although generally safer than pharmaceuticals, CAMs may cause side effects.

In 2008, the National Prescribing Service commissioned two reports on CAM information. The first report identified the following areas of need for information about CAMs for both health professionals and consumers:⁴

- content
- indication
- therapeutics
- efficacy

- dosage
- adverse effects
- interactions
- general safety
- use in special populations
- storage.

The second report was an independent evaluation of the quality of information resources about CAMs.⁶ A summary of the report is given in the box on page 63.

As GPs increasingly recognise the widespread use of CAMs and the need to open channels of communication and specifically ask patients about CAM use, the need for concise, reliable, up-to-date and easily accessible information is pressing. The following are websites and widely available books that are well referenced, carry no pecuniary interests and, in the most part, are updated by medical practitioners and pharmacists. The advantages and disadvantages of each resource are also summarised.

Websites

Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database

www.naturaldatabase.com

The subscription-only National Medicines Comprehensive Database allows searches to be made according to the generic product name, the disease or

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condition it is used for and the brand name. Two useful features are an effectiveness checker and interactions checker. The effectiveness checker shows the likelihood of a natural product being effective for a particular condition, whereas the interactions checker uses colour coding to present an overview of the interaction risk (e.g. coloured red for a major interaction).

The monographs detail safety, effectiveness, mechanism of action, interactions, dosage and comments from the editor in chief, who is a pharmacist. The database is edited by pharmacists and researchers.

Another useful feature is the clinical management series, which covers common conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression and premenstrual syndrome. The series discusses safety and effectiveness of herbs and supplements for these conditions and summarises the information in a recommendation chart, which combines level of effectiveness and safety of supplements. Products that are likely to be safe and effective are colour coded green ('consider recommending this product'), whereas possibly unsafe and ineffective products are colour coded red ('recommend against using this product').

- **Pros:** effectiveness and interactions checkers; comprehensive information updated by pharmacists.
- **Cons:** requires a subscription fee (US\$92 [A\$104] for a year).

US National Library of Medicine and the National Institute of Health Medline Plus

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html

The Medline Plus resource provides comprehensive information on therapeutics, safety, adverse effects and interactions for herbs and supplements, and a summary of the evidence for their benefits. Information is provided by the Natural Standard Research Collaboration, a

group of widely-published international researchers who are predominantly medical doctors or pharmacists. Although written for consumers, the

information provided is comprehensive enough to meet the needs of GPs.

- **Pros:** free, comprehensive information; easy-to-read evidence summary.

Key points from the National Prescribing Service review of complementary and alternative medicine information resources 2008/09⁶

Methods

Phase 1 of the study

Identification of information resources on complementary and alternative medicines.

Phase 2 of the study

Shortlist of 26 resources assessed according to criteria for currency and accessibility, coverage, transparency, content quality and accuracy.

Phase 3 of the study

Thorough review of the short-listed resources.

Results

Six 'tier 1' resources were identified, with total scores and scores for all domains (technical and content quality, clinical utility) above the upper 95% confidence interval of the mean of all short-listed resources.

- Natural Standard Professional Database package: www.naturalstandard.com
- Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database (Health Professional Edition): www.naturaldatabase.com
- Natural Standard Professional Database – professional monographs: www.naturalstandard.com (click on products)
- Herbal Medicines and Dietary Supplements package (accessed through Medicines Complete): www.medicinescomplete.com
- Natural Standard Professional Database – bottom-line monographs: www.naturalstandard.com (click on products)
- US National Library of Medicine and the National Institute of Health Medline Plus: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html

Three 'tier 2' resources were identified, with total scores and scores for two-thirds of quality domains above the upper 95% confidence interval of the mean of all short-listed resources.

- Barnes J, Anderson L, Phillipson D. Herbal Medicines. 3rd ed. London, UK: Pharmaceutical Press; 2007.
- The Health Library Natural & Alternative Treatments: <http://healthlibrary.epnet.com/GetContent.aspx?token=af362d97-4f80-4453-a175-02cc6220a387&chunkid=120459>
- Braun L, Cohen M. Herbs and natural supplements: an evidence-based guide. 3rd ed. Marrickville, Australia: Elsevier; 2009.

Conclusion

The review panel concluded that one or more of the tier 1 or 2 resources should be made available to health professionals and consumers in various formats to support decisions about the quality use of CAMs.

- **Cons:** only provides information on herbs and supplements; does not cover other therapies.

NHS Evidence – complementary and alternative medicine

www.library.nhs.uk/cam

For those who want level I evidence only, this UK website from the National Health Service provides a link to systematic reviews and meta-analyses on herbs, supplements, dietary and nutritional therapies, and a range of other CAM therapies such as acupuncture and hypnosis. Annual evidence updates and patient information are available for certain topics only. It is also possible to browse the evidence for and against CAM use in conditions such as fibromyalgia and hypertension.

- **Pros:** free, easy access to author's conclusions; quality of systematic reviews is assessed by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination with a team of health researchers, medical information specialists, health economists and a dissemination team; covers therapies other than herbs and supplements.
- **Cons:** no information on therapeutics, safety or adverse reactions unless specifically reviewed in a systematic review.

The Health Library Natural & Alternative Treatments

<http://healthlibrary.epnet.com/GetContent.aspx?token=af362d97-4f80-4453-a175-02cc6220a387&chunkid=120459>

The Health library website is updated by doctors. It provides similar information to that provided by Medline Plus, but with a greater level of detail from randomised controlled trials. Health Library also provides a description of and evidence for and against a long list of CAM therapies including some esoteric ones such as vega testing.

- **Pros:** free; more detail on randomised controlled trials for those who are

interested in the details.

- **Cons:** too much detail can make it difficult to browse quickly for the evidence.

Books

All of the following books are written by medical doctors, are reasonably priced and the first two books come with a searchable CD-ROM. They are invaluable additions to a GP's consultation room.

Ernst E. *The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh, UK: Mosby; 2006.

Professor Ernst is a UK physician and renowned researcher in complementary medicine. In this concise guide he provides a summary of the evidence for herbs, supplements and therapies such as acupuncture, as well as information on safety, adverse events, therapeutics and interactions. Chapters summarising the level of evidence for the benefit of CAM use in 46 common conditions such as migraine and insomnia are also provided. An easy-to-read table makes it very quick to browse through the information during a face-to-face consultation.

- **Pros:** concise and easy to refer to; covers physical therapies as well as herbs and supplements.
- **Cons:** may be a little out of date.

Braun L, Cohen M. *Herbs and natural supplements: an evidence-based guide*. 3rd ed. Marrickville, Australia: Elsevier; 2009.

Written by an Australian doctor and pharmacist team, this comprehensive guide covers a wide variety of common herbs and supplements. It also provides detailed information on traditional uses, clinical indications, therapeutics, interactions, adverse events, and use in pregnancy and lactation, as well as answers to patient's 'frequently asked questions'. The latest edition contains updates and new monographs.

- **Pros:** provides very comprehensive information on herbs and supplements; useful frequently asked questions section.
- **Cons:** does not cover physical therapies; information may be too detailed to refer to quickly during a consultation.

Rakel D. *Integrative medicine*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia, USA: Saunders Elsevier; 2007.

Edited by an Assistant Professor of the Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, this is an excellent comprehensive and thoughtful disease-based guide to integrative medicine. It offers an overview of pathophysiology, conventional therapy and CAMs for a wide range of common clinical conditions such as hypothyroidism, migraine and atopic dermatitis. The CAMs examined include supplements, botanicals, Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine, mind-body therapies and lifestyle interventions. The chapters are written to assist the clinician, with useful clinical tips such as communication strategies to motivate lifestyle change in patients with hypertension. Other excellent features for busy clinicians are the evidence-harm grading icons, prevention prescriptions and a quick-glance therapeutic review, which summarises the chapter. The book comes with software for a Personal Digital Assistant but not for desktop computers; it can be accessed online with a subscription to MD Consult (US\$349 [A\$402] annually).

- **Pros:** provides a useful overview of the integrative approach towards common conditions; the therapeutic review is particularly helpful.
- **Cons:** does not refer to evidence as extensively as the other two books mentioned above.

Conclusion

The widespread use of CAMs by our

patients and the emergence of evidence for some complementary therapies has led to the need for GPs to become familiar with commonly used CAMs or be able to readily access quality information. This article provides some good-quality available resources that will assist busy GPs to build a working knowledge of CAMs to best serve the interests of their patients. **MT**

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