

Complementary and Alternative Medicines and Therapies (CAM)

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Complementary and alternative therapies (CAM) usually refer to treatments that do not use medications prescribed by doctors. These therapies are described as complementary as they are designed to complement, or add to your existing medical treatment — not replace it. Many people turn to complementary therapies because they are viewed as safe and natural. However, there is potential for harmful effects or for interactions between complementary medicines and prescribed treatments.

Who uses CAM?

Many people are interested in exploring alternative therapies. A large Australian study estimated that 52% of Australians use complementary medicines and 27% consult CAM practitioners. Of those using CAM 57% do not tell their doctor, and 50% use complementary medicines and conventional medicines together. There is no reason to believe that these figures would be any different in New Zealand.

How safe is CAM?

In general, complementary medicines and therapies have not been studied as extensively as conventional medicines. Often little is known about how effective they are, or of any possible harmful effects. Even therapies described as natural can have harmful side effects and can react with other medication that you are already taking for other conditions. While some complementary medicines do have some evidence to support them, many do not and others are simply bogus. There are some complementary medicines which are potentially harmful for people with asthma (for example, Royal Jelly from bee pollen and echinacea).

Should I tell my doctor if I am considering CAM?

If you are considering using a complementary therapy you should discuss it with your doctor first and continue taking your regular medication.

What should I do if I begin to use CAM?

Keeping an Asthma Peak Flow and Symptom Diary and following your Self-Management Plan initially will help you determine if there is some change in your asthma control. The Foundation recommends that people with asthma use a written Self-Management plan prepared with the help of their doctor or asthma educator to assist with the controlling, monitoring and treating of asthma symptoms.

As there is no cure known for asthma, the Foundation recommends caution in using any complementary treatment which claims to cure asthma.

In summary, no treatment — complementary or conventional — is entirely risk free.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

References:

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