AN INTRODUCTION TO COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

As a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, you may be willing to try anything if it appears to offer help for your child. It is easy to get frustrated with the lack of certainty about what therapies will help your child feel healthy, makes friends, live independently, get married, go to college, etc.

It is also easy to get confused with the different types of “medicine” available. Below are definitions of several medical systems of treatments:

**Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)** is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine.

**Complementary Medicine** is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are used in conjunction with conventional medical treatments. This practice can also be called integrative or integrated medicine.

**Integrative or Integrated Medicine** is relationship-based care that combines mainstream and complementary therapies for which there is some high-quality scientific evidence of safety and effectiveness to promote health for the whole person in the context of his or her family and community.

**Alternative Medicine** is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products used in place of conventional medicine.

**Conventional Medicine** (also called Western or Allopathic Medicine) is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) and D.O. (doctor of osteopathic medicine) degrees and by allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and registered nurses.
Holistic Medicine is patient-centered care that includes the consideration of biological, psychological, spiritual, social, and environmental aspects of health.

When conventional medicine practices don’t seem to be helping, you may become more open to treatments which do not necessarily have the same degree of scientific support or evidence, such as Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). This is common, in fact, more than half of families of children on the autism spectrum may have tried or currently use some type of CAM treatment. But in your eagerness to help your child by trying CAM, there are important things to first consider to keep him or her safe.

Using CAM should mean that your child receives both conventional medicine and therapy treatments (such as prescribed medications or therapies such as speech-language therapy), as well as CAM therapies. The most widely used CAM treatments reported for children and adolescents on the autism spectrum are special diets, vitamins or supplements (such as melatonin), chiropractic therapy, and anti-inflammatory agents (such as antifungal agents). Not all of these treatments have been proven safe or effective in scientific research studies and there are risks involved. Potentially harmful CAM treatments, such as chelation, oral antibiotics, or excessive amounts of vitamins, is highly cautioned against.

If you want your child to try a CAM therapy, it is important to first find and read information about the therapy from reputable sources, like the CAR Autism Roadmap™. Additionally, it is imperative to inform your pediatrician that you are considering or have decided on a CAM treatment plan. Your pediatrician should work with you to determine if there are any medical conditions or medications that might interfere with any of the chosen CAM treatments.

Related Articles:

- Evaluating Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) for Treating Symptoms of ASD
- How Do I Choose a Treatment?
- Evidence Based Practices

Additional Resources:

- National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Website
- Complementary & Alternative Approaches for Autism, from Autism
National Standards Report

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Treatments for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Beware of False or Misleading Claims for Treating Autism

The Center for Autism Research and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia do not endorse or recommend any specific person or organization or form of treatment. The information included within the CAR Autism Roadmap & trade; and CAR Resource Directory & trade; should not be considered medical advice and should serve only as a guide to resources publicly and privately available. Choosing a treatment, course of action, and/or a resource is a personal decision, which should take into account each individual's and family's particular circumstances.