
THE BASICS: Defining Integrative Medicine (IM)

Since the 1960's, Americans have become increasingly familiar with the terms *alternative medicine* and *complementary medicine*, and have applied them to healing methods such as massage, acupuncture, and nutrition therapy. However, mounting scientific evidence on the safety and efficacy of such treatments has led to the creation of a new term: *integrative medicine*, or IM.

IM combines mainstream medical therapies with non-conventional complementary therapies. However, IM only uses complementary therapies for which there is some high-quality scientific evidence of safety and effectiveness. In short, **IM utilizes all appropriate, evidence-based therapies to achieve health.**

This common sense but scientifically rooted concept is catching on with the American public, who now partner with their family physicians to include evidence-based, non-conventional treatments in their healthcare regimes. Practice of IM has become so credible that the American Hospital Association states that more than 16% of hospitals, including leading medical facilities at Harvard, Mayo, and Duke, feature IM centers as part of their institutions. Among hospitals not currently offering IM, 24% stated that they planned to do so in the future.

So are there distinct differences between this “new medicine” (IM) and its forerunners, alternative or complementary medicine?

Yes. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) defines complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as “a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine.” While some scientific evidence exists regarding some complementary and alternative therapies, many still require well-designed scientific studies to definitively answer questions about safety and efficacy.

NCCAM also offers the following key difference between complementary and alternative medicine:

- Alternative medicine is used *in place of* conventional medicine. An example of an alternative therapy is using a special diet to treat cancer instead of undergoing surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy that has been recommended by a conventional doctor.
- Complementary medicine is used *together* with conventional medicine. An example of a complementary therapy is using aromatherapy to help lessen a patient's discomfort following surgery.

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So although IM utilizes complementary therapies, the stringent requirement that these treatments have a solid scientific basis exists, making it “once removed” from complementary or alternative systems. However, many practitioners and patients look forward to the day when the practice of using all evidence-based methods becomes commonplace and the IM designation is no longer required.

It’s also important to note that IM, like most health care systems, is more than simply a list of treatments or therapies. IM values all aspects of a person’s health – mind, body, and spirit – and reaffirms the importance of an open relationship between practitioner and patient. Those who practice IM consider a patient’s overall satisfaction with life, pointing to irrefutable proof that stress management and good mental hygiene positively affect healing and health. Finally, instead of focusing solely on curing disease and illness, IM also emphasizes preventing disease and/or living well with chronic disease.

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