

COMPLEMENTARY AND INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE*

A Resource for Veterans, Service Members, and Their Families

Introduction

Veterans seeking new or alternative ways to manage and improve overall health and well-being may be interested in learning about *Complementary and Integrative Medicine* and its many benefits. So, what exactly does Complementary and Integrative Medicine mean? Well, you are probably familiar with so called “conventional medicine” which includes visits to licensed health care providers (such as doctors and nurse practitioners), regular medical tests (such as blood work and x-rays), and the wide range of medications that are prescribed for health problems. “Complementary Medicine” is a group of different medical and health practices that are NOT considered part of conventional medicine. “Integrative Medicine” refers to complementary practices; for example, using acupuncture in addition to conventional medical care such as medication to help lessen pain. Although acupuncture involves a specialty trained health care provider, many complementary practices are things that can safely be done on your own for general wellness. For example, the practice of yoga can be done with the assistance of a trained teacher or can be learned by watching a DVD or reading a book and practiced at home.

For Veterans, incorporating proven complementary therapies or practices as part of your health care plan has a number of benefits. For example, specific complementary therapies can help to alleviate symptoms such as pain and fatigue as well as help with psychological issues like post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Recognizing this, Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals and the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) have made Integrative Medicine a high priority. Ensuring your safety in any complementary or conventional treatment is a top priority which is why it is important to ask about or know what the evidence is for the effectiveness of any complementary practice. Although Integrative Medicine is not yet readily available as a standard VA service Nationwide, many VA health care facilities are taking steps to incorporate proven complementary treatment practices into conventional medicine services available for Veterans.

Different Types of Complementary Medicine Practices

Complementary Medicine methods or practices are often grouped into broad categories, such as natural products (e.g., Dietary supplements), mind-body medicine (e.g., Relaxation training, Meditation), and manipulative and body-based practices (e.g., Massage therapy). Another way these practices can be grouped is whether it requires a trained practitioner or whether you can do them independently at home.

Practitioner-based methods:

1. ACUPUNCTURE:

- Acupuncture is a treatment that can be offered by either a conventionally trained Medical Doctor with a certificate in acupuncture or by a licensed Acupuncturist trained in Oriental Medicine. (Note: Oriental Medicine is a whole system of

medicine different from traditional Western medicine and based on ancient non-traditional healing practices.)

- Acupuncture treatment involves the stimulation of specific points on the body using hair-like fine needles that are then manipulated by hand or by electrical stimulation. During sessions, most patients report feeling only a slight sharp sensation followed by a slight tingling sensation.
- Acupuncture may help in the treatment of chronic pain (including low back pain, joint pain, and neck pain), and may also be helpful for PTSD and headaches. It may help alleviate anxiety, panic disorders, and insomnia.

2. MASSAGE THERAPY:

- Massage therapy is a treatment that is delivered by a licensed massage therapist or a conventionally trained health care provider (such as a nurse or physical therapist) with specialty training in massage. Sometimes practitioners will teach their patients how to do some part of the massage on themselves to continue at home.
- The term massage therapy encompasses many different techniques. In general, therapists press, rub, and otherwise manipulate the muscles and other soft tissues of the body.
- People use massage for a variety of health-related purposes. These include to: relieve pain, rehabilitate injuries, reduce stress, increase relaxation, address anxiety and depression, and aid general well-being.

Complementary Medicine practices you can do yourself:

1. MEDITATION:

- In meditation, a person learns to focus attention. There are two common forms of meditation: mindfulness and concentrative. Mindfulness meditation helps the person to become mindful of thoughts, feelings, and sensations and to observe them in a nonjudgmental way. Concentrative

meditation involves focusing the mind on a specific calming word, object, or image to focus one's attention to allow the mind to easily let go of unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

- People use meditation to reduce anxiety and to cope with/reduce stress. Meditation exercises are also used to help with chronic pain, insomnia, and depression.

2. MEDITATIVE MOVEMENT:

■ YOGA

Yoga is a mind-body practice that is part of a system of Ayurvedic Medicine (an ancient medical system from India). It combines physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation for relaxation, and overall well-being. There are numerous types of yoga. Hatha yoga, the most commonly practiced in the United States and Europe, emphasizes postures and breathing exercises. One style of yoga that is currently being taught in some VA facilities is Yoga Nidra. The literal translation of Yoga Nidra is Yogi Sleep. It is an ancient form of meditation that will take you into the deepest levels of relaxation while still remaining fully aware. It is an evidence-based practice of deep relaxation and meditation that releases negative emotions and thought patterns and calms the nervous system.

People use yoga for a variety of conditions. Studies of Veterans and civilians alike show that yoga may be beneficial for back pain, while newer research is confirming the potential benefits for insomnia and PTSD. People who practice Yoga describe how it improves mood and sense of well-being, counteracts stress, and helps with conditions such as anxiety and depression.

■ TAI CHI

Tai Chi is sometimes referred to as "moving meditation" because practitioners move their bodies slowly, gently, and with awareness, while

breathing deeply. There are many different styles, but all involve slow, relaxed, graceful movements, each flowing into the next. The body is in constant motion, and posture is important. Individuals practicing Tai Chi must also concentrate, putting aside distracting thoughts, and they must breathe in a deep and relaxed, but focused manner.

People use Tai Chi to improve muscle strength, coordination, flexibility, and balance. In addition, research studies show that Tai Chi may help ease pain and stiffness, improve sleep, and is good for overall health and wellness.

■ QIGONG

Qigong is the more ancient form of Tai Chi and is over 3,000 years old. It is part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Qigong movements are designed to increase energy and improve the flow of energy in the body. Qigong movements are simple exercises that can be done by anyone with any physical ability. The movements can be practiced individually without special clothing or equipment.

Research studies show Qigong has similar benefits as Tai Chi, such as improving balance and reducing blood pressure. New findings indicate Qigong may help improve pain, fatigue, and mood in patients with Fibromyalgia.

You may contact one of the WRIISCs for complementary medicine resources at your local VA.

Is Complementary and Integrative Medicine for you?

If you are a Veteran with chronic health symptoms or conditions, or even if you are just looking to improve your overall health and wellness, incorporating Complementary and Integrative Medicine into your health care plan may prove beneficial. Talking with your health care providers about your Complementary

and Integrative Medicine use will help ensure coordinated and safe care. Your health care providers can help you decide whether a particular therapy is right for you. They can answer questions, suggest reliable sources of information, and point out potential benefits and risks. More information about the specific types of Complementary and Integrative Medicine discussed above and more can be found at this link: <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/atoz.htm>.

Complementary and Integrative Medicine at the WRIISC

At the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC), we specialize in the evaluation and treatment of Veterans with medically unexplained symptoms and difficult to diagnose conditions. There are three WRIISC facilities: locations are in East Orange, NJ, Washington, DC, and Palo Alto, CA. Complementary and Integrative Medicine has become important to us over the years because it offers another treatment to Veterans that will possibly alleviate their hard to treat symptoms and help them to live a better life.

Both the DC and CA WRIISCs offer Complementary and Integrative Medicine programs. The DC WRIISC hosts Yoga Nidra classes and individual and group acupuncture sessions. The CA WRIISC offers a Mind/Body treatment program for Veterans with chronic health conditions such as pain and fatigue and yoga classes.

For more information about any of these services or to find out about eligibility requirements, please contact Antoinette Lomax at the DC WRIISC at 202-745-8000, extension 8249 or Louise Mahoney at the CA WRIISC at 650-849-0407. You can also visit the WRIISC Web site at: <http://www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov>.

This fact sheet was adapted from the following sources:

What Is Complementary and Integrative Medicine?

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatiscam/>

Tips for Talking With Your Health Care Providers about Complementary and Integrative Medicine

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/talkingaboutcam.htm>

Be an Informed Consumer

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/decisions/>

Links for information on different types of Complementary and Integrative Medicine

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/atoz.htm>

*Complementary and Integrative Medicine is sometimes referred to as Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)