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Having an Alt-Med Doc Talk

Open communication is the key to successfully integrating your treatments.

by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor



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Doctors have a lot of specialized skills. They can interpret lab data and make complex diagnoses. They can analyze X-rays, take biopsies and conduct life-saving procedures. What they can't do: read minds. So if you've been thinking of enhancing your treatment with complementary and alternative medicine (such as chiropractic, acupuncture, aromatherapy or naturopathy), you can't expect your doctors to just know--you have to tell them.

Unfortunately, most patients are keeping their lips sealed, says Alyssa Cotler, public health advisor for the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. According to a 2006 NCCAM survey, two-thirds of all patients who seek complementary care fail to inform their primary care physicians. Why? Many of them said they didn't know they were supposed to. Others were waiting for the doctor to broach the subject.

"It is important to have this discussion with your doctor to ensure safe and coordinated care among all of (your) therapists," says Cotler. "Having this discussion allows for fully integrated care and minimizes risks."

Does this mean you should just march into the exam room and boldly announce your intentions to discontinue the treatment your doctor has prescribed in favor of something else? Not if your goal is to rally her support.

"Don't be combative," says Miles Hassell, M.D., medical director of the Providence Integrative Medicine Program in Portland, Ore. "Often, patients are ready for a fight from the get-go, and that can create a fight."

The first step? Do your homework. If you've heard herbal tinctures will cure your depression, or that acupuncture will ease your intestinal distress, bring this information to your doc. Show him the article you saw, bring in the brochure from the herbalist, find a study that demonstrates the efficacy of the therapy you wish to try--anything that will assure her that you are informed about your choice. Also, put together a list of all the medications and supplements you take, as well as any other therapies (conventional and complementary) that you have used. While you're at it, create a personal health record to keep all your information in one place.

Next, tell your doctor what you think is lacking in your current regimen, and explain what you hope to achieve by visiting another type of provider, says Hassell. Then, ask and consider his opinion--even if it isn't what you want to hear. This means being open to the possibility that your doctor might be right when she says a particular therapy is unlikely to help.

"Often, it doesn't occur to [the patient] that the medical doctor might know something about the topic," Hassell points out.

Still, no matter how well-prepared you are for the conversation, there is always the chance that your doctor will frown on the idea of complementary care. That's because many physicians aren't familiar with the kinds of benefits complementary care provides, so they feel that a "thumbs-up" is akin to throwing their patient to the wolves, Hassell explains. And, he adds, "It is difficult for a doctor to know the quality of a [complementary-care provider] unless they know them personally."

Nathalie Johnson, M.D., medical director of the Legacy Breast Health Center in Portland, Ore., calls this a "tough situation." Her advice? Get the two providers talking.

"[The patient] can ask their complementary-care provider to give the physician a call," says Johnson, who often refers her patients to acupuncturists.

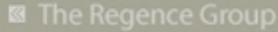
This allows the provider to explain her approach to the physician, which will help him form an opinion as to whether the treatment is likely to help--or hurt--the patient.

And if the doctor continues to reject your decision without offering a reasonable medical explanation? Well, it might be time to find a new doctor.

"Avoid conventional doctors that slam all non-conventional medicine, and vice versa," say Hassell. "When you get a group that automatically disparages another group, you should probably go somewhere else."

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