The New Medicine Chest

Do complementary and alternative treatments offer a different path to health than traditional and prescription medicine—or just profits for “quacks”? A Real Health roundtable, moderated by Hilary Beard.

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Do you take ginko biloba to improve your memory or horny goat weed to improve sexual stamina? As holistic health becomes more popular, many people are incorporating these and other herbs, as well as vitamins, nutritional supplements and other nonmedical remedies, into their self-care regimen. These approaches are sometimes less expensive and easier to obtain than conventional prescription meds. In fact, many black Americans believe that complementary and alternative medical approaches offer our community a better option than the medical system and pharmaceutical industries. After all, their legacies of experimenting on and making money off of us still make us wonder if we’re safe in their hands.

But most holistic approaches do not offer the same standards of scientific research, clinical trials or consumer protection as traditional medicine does. Many people wonder if the remedies actually work, if some practitioners are bilking poor people or if “quacks” endanger their clients by replacing prescription medications that can clearly save lives with ineffective herbs.

How can we be informed holistic health care consumers? *Real Health* asked four experts in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to advise us on how to benefit from its promise and protect ourselves from its perils. Our panelists are:

Queen Afua is a holistic healer and the founder of Brooklyn’s Heal Thyself center and the author of Heal Thyself for Health and Longevity

Eric Bailey, PhD, MPH is an associate professor of medical anthropology at East Carolina University and the author of African American Alternative Medicine: Using Alternative Medicine to Prevent and Control Chronic Diseases

Roni DeLuz, RN, ND, PhD is the owner of the Martha’s Vineyard Holistic Retreat and the author of *21 Pounds in 21 Days: The Martha’s Vineyard Diet Detox*

Glenn Ellis is a Philadelphia-based health educator, homeopath and complementary medicine consultant and a regular contributor to Real Health

Real Health: How do holistic health practices or practitioners differ from traditional medicine that we get from a medical doctor?
Queen Afua: Holistic health is about educating yourself and taking more responsibility. One way is to use nature; on some level everyone can be their own physician, whether through herbs or juicing therapy or learning how to combine foods properly. But you have to know what, when and how to do it.

Roni DeLuz: I agree. Naturopathic medicine, which includes things like clinical nutrition, herbology, homeopathy, acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, is complicated. Naturopathic doctors are educators. If I give you a pill and don't empower you with knowledge, you will never get well.

Glenn Ellis: But people can call themselves a holistic practitioner for many reasons—because they work in an herb store or because they sell vitamins to make money on the side or because they have received a formal degree. So it's important to find qualified and professional advice.

RH: That's important. Most CAM is not scientifically proven, regulated or formally structured like traditional health care is. So is it smart for black folks to use these approaches or should we stick to what's tested and proven?
Ellis: I believe people should use CAM together with traditional medicine. But the shortcoming of CAM is that little qualified, professional advice is available unless you do a lot of homework.

Eric Bailey: I believe in incorporating both sides. I would be very cautious about putting your entire well-being into one type of practitioner. But we need clinical testing to reassure us that alternative medicines do actually work.

DeLuz: Naturopathic medicine is growing, but I'm afraid African Americans are missing out. Many of us ignore small problems for five or 10 years until we receive a full-blown diagnosis. Traditional medicine, which has "quick fixes" like drugs and surgery, seems easy. But once you get on prescription medicine, you need another and another, or surgery. Others don't want to spend money on naturopathy or other mind/body interventions since insurance doesn't reimburse them. But where are you going to be in 10 or 20 years—healthy, or on dialysis, taking 10 prescription drugs, bent over with arthritis? A lot of us have 30 good years in us but won't get there because we ignore small problems we could correct with nonmedical approaches.

RH: How can we make sure that the holistic practitioners we see are qualified?
Bailey: Don't be passive or become immersed in one point of view. Build a network of practitioners with various expertise, and always get a second or third opinion.

Ellis: We have to ask what people's credentials are, what their training is and where it was. Then we need to find out more about the place where they got educated. In traditional medicine, the institutions already have established reputations, but we have to go a step further in CAM.

Afua: Ask around for a certified naturopath or herbalist whose clients have experienced success, then ask them how long they've been in business. If you have a chronic disease, you need someone experienced. You can also ask at big health fairs. People running health events know who in the community is successful in what disease issues.

RH: Should we follow CAM as an alternative to traditional medical care or as an addition to it?
Ellis: There is no alternative to medicine—it provides diagnoses and screenings. There's nothing responsible I can do to help a person if they're not connected to a doctor.

Afua: Doctors do excellent work in examination and diagnosis, and it takes a while for the body to shift. So while a client may come in for holistic approaches, many also need medical support or medication.

DeLuz: You have to work together, but it's not always easy. Many doctors don't understand. Often both the client and the doctor need to be educated. I tell clients, "Look for a doctor you feel comfortable working with along with your naturopath."

Bailey: Many physicians are incorporating new training so they can see and listen to the patient more holistically, understand their belief system and try to match whatever treatment strategies they've learned to the patient's point of view. Many alternative practitioners are including more biomedical strategies and realizing that some of their approaches only go so far. Many times we think they operate against each other, but most often they operate together.

RH: When should we seek holistic assistance?
DeLuz: When you experience the symptom. First go to the doctor to get your diagnosis and then sit with your naturopath and say, "I need help in staying well." Unfortunately, many people look at naturopaths as their last alternative. They receive a diagnosis, don't take care of themselves or take their medicine, then come to us as their last hope.

RH: Not all doctors know about or agree with holistic approaches. Should we tell them if we're taking herbs or other remedies?
Ellis: Tell your doctor about everything you take. If the doctor doesn't know about it, bring them all the information you can find. Because if anything happens, the ambulance is going to take you to the emergency room, not the health food store. If you've informed your primary care doctor, that person will be able to advise them that you're taking X medication and Y herb. That information enters into any decision that's made about your life.

DeLuz: That's very important. I had one client who was taking extra vitamin D but didn't tell her doctor even when she started having severe neurological problems, blurred vision, was sleeping a lot and feeling lethargic. The doctor didn't know what was going on and ordered CAT scans of her brain. Later they realized she had overdosed on vitamin D. In the meantime, she spent a lot of money on CAT scans.

RH: If you have a chronic illness do you really need to see a holistic practitioner or can you just read a book, go to the health food store and do it yourself?
DeLuz: If you're healthy, you can safely buy a protein drink, vitamin drink, green drink or other food-based nutrition from the health food store. But if you have any chronic illness, you need to work with a degreed practitioner. Herbal remedies are medicinal. They're not safe if you don't know what you're doing. Go to a practitioner first and the practitioner will tell you what to get from the health food store.

RH: It seems like you can buy the same herbs, supplements and remedies in expensive and cheaper versions. Are we harming ourselves if we try to save money?
DeLuz: The effectiveness of a product depends on its quality. A lot of time the way a product is made makes it cheaper but it may not be safe for everyone or effective. A trained practioner will direct you to to quality products that will help you. Once again, knowledge is power.

Ellis: I agree. A lot of people think they're saving money, but they're taking products and brands that don't work.

RH: Many people seek CAM to help them get off of prescription drugs. How realistic is that goal for the average person?
Ellis: If a person's hypertension or diabetes is managed and under control, then a practitioner may be able to consider helping them get off their meds. But to take somebody who has out-of-control hypertension and say, "I have an herbal formula that can get that down"—that's irresponsible.

Afua: Most people can decrease their medication, but it's a process they have to work at slowly. In the meantime, stick with your physician. Some people come off meds prematurely, but their body hasn't made adjustments yet and goes into crisis. When it comes to holistic approaches, it's OK to take a baby step and honor it. But I encourage my clients to "go there" and make a total shift. If you prepare yourself properly and follow the process—21 days of cleansing and implementing a total-wellness strategy that includes things like eating the right foods, using herbs, implementing juice therapy and proper food combining—you can begin to disconnect from the sicknesses that run in your family.

RH: What about diet and exercise? Is there any way to stay healthy without changing our lifestyle?
Bailey: No. Certain diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, are a direct consequence of what foods we consume and how we've prepared them.

DeLuz: You have two choices: Either give your body healthy foods and exercise or get a chronic illness—there's no way around it. You need exercise for oxygen and good circulation. And your body cannot thrive off of processed foods that are devoid of vital nutrients that keep your body healthy. People who don't give their body nutrients are constantly breaking down. The more you give your body to repair with, the better health you'll have.

Hilary Beard is Real Health's executive editor. She coauthored 21 Pounds in 21 Days: The Martha's Vineyard Diet Detox *with roundtable contributor Roni DeLuz.*

ADD TO YOUR MEDICINE CABINET

Aspirin, alcohol, dental floss...Every medicine chest houses these familyfavorites. What holistic remedies should you have in your home? Weasked our panel of experts for their favorites. Always consult yourdoctor first and follow the dosing instructions on the label.

Remedy:	Arnica	Cascara sagrada	Ginger	Magnesium	Sambucol	Valerian
Use:	alleviates aches, pains and muscle soreness	stimulates a bowel movement	improves digestion	improves sleep	treats colds and flu	reduces stress
Best Form:	gel, pellets	offensively bitter so capsules are best	capsules	powder, tablets, capsules	syrup	capsules

GLOSSARY OF ALTERNATIVE PRACTITIONERS

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), the federal agency charged with investigating and testing holistic approaches, recognizes four complementary medical systems whose theories and practices are comprehensive enough to rival at least some aspects of traditional medicine's: Ayurveda, homeopathy, naturopathy and Traditional Chinese (or Oriental) Medicine. Their practitioners' training levels can vary, NCCAM's testing of their treatments is incomplete, the results are often conflicting, and they are typically not covered by health insurance (expect to pay $75 to $150 per consultation, depending upon where you live; appointments typically run much longer than a doctor's visit—sometimes an hour or more).

Ayurveda

This natural healing system native to India seeks to restore balance in mind, body and spirit. Treatments include controlled breathing, dietary modification, exercise, herbs, meditation and sun exposure.

Homeopathy

Practitioners of this primarily European healing philosophy believe that "like cures like"—that by taking infinitesimal doses of "remedies" that stimulate similar symptoms to the ones that you're having, you can trigger the body's defense mechanisms to fight the condition. For more information or to find a practitioner contact the National Center for Homeopathy (nationalcenterforhomeopathy.org; 703.548.7790).

Naturopathy

This European medical approach assumes that a healthy body naturally heals itself. Practitioners are both doctors and educators who examine physical, mental, emotional, social, genetic,

environmental and other factors affecting the patient. They use acupuncture, dietary modification and nutritional supplements, herbs, hydrotherapy, joint manipulation, lifestyle counseling and massage to help an individual regain balance. To learn more or find a naturopath near you, visit the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (naturopathic.org; 866.538.2267).

Traditional Chinese (or Oriental) Medicine (TCM/TOM)

Practitioners believe health is a reflection of balance in the body's "yin" (cold, slow or passive energy) and "yang" (hot, excited or active) energy, called "qi" or "chi." Disease develops when stagnation occurs in both energy and the blood. Treatments typically include acupuncture, Chinese herbs and massage and manipulation. To learn more, visit the American Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (aaaomonline.org; 866.455.7999).

To learn more, visit NCCAM (nccam.nih.gov), the University of Minnesota's CAM resources (takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/therapies) and the Alternative Medicine Foundation (amfoundation.org).

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