

Alternative treatments

More than 45,000 readers tell us what helped

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Done anything alternative lately? If so, you have a lot of company. When we surveyed 45,601 *Consumer Reports* subscribers online, we found that three out of four were using some form of alternative therapy for their general health. More than 38 million adults make in excess of 300 million visits to acupuncturists, chiropractors, massage therapists, and other complementary and alternative practitioners each year in the United States.

Despite the hoopla over alternative treatments, when we asked respondents how well the therapies they used worked for 12 common health problems, results showed that they were usually deemed far less helpful than prescription medicine for most of the conditions.

Even widely used dietary supplements ranked far below over-the-counter medications in many cases. But hands-on treatments such as chiropractic and deep-tissue massage, as well as the mind-body practice of yoga dominated the lists of helpful alternative treatments for discomfort from conditions such as back pain, neck pain, and osteoarthritis.

Carola Hamann, 42, of San Francisco said she has found that yoga, combined with monthly chiropractic adjustments and some exercises her physical therapist recommended, has helped a lot to relieve pain in her hips from osteoarthritis and other concerns. She keeps her medical doctor informed about therapies she has tried but notes that her chiropractor "sees how everything's connected."

Of alternative treatments used for general health, mainstream vitamins and minerals were the most widely used, with 73 percent of respondents taking them. But 57 percent said they used dietary supplements other than vitamins or minerals. And about one in five reported using mind-body therapies such as yoga or hands-on therapies such as massage.

A total of 30,332 survey respondents gave us their perceptions of the helpfulness of treatments for their most bothersome conditions over the past two years. The respondents were *Consumer Reports* subscribers, and our findings might not be representative of the general population. Respondents based their opinions on personal experience, so the results can't be compared with scientific clinical trials. And our results do not take into account the power of the placebo effect, the tendency of people to find even simulated or sham interventions helpful

Why these treatments?

For most conditions we asked about, the No. 1 reason respondents gave for choosing an alternative treatment was simply that they were "a proponent" of it.

"Some people use these therapies because it's just the way they were raised," says Richard Nahin, Ph.D., M.P.H., senior adviser for scientific coordination and outreach at the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

Some say they have gone through a transformational process, such as a major illness that has caused them to look at their life in a different way, Nahin says. Others believe dietary supplements are safer than prescription medication because they're natural, even though that's not necessarily the case, he says.



Complementary care

Carola Hamann of San Francisco likes to play hockey despite hips that ache from arthritis.



Adjustment

Michael Shannon of Ocala, Fla., gets treatment from chiropractor Dennis Seese.

And for some conditions, people choose alternative treatments to avoid the side effects of conventional medications. That was true for about two out of five respondents suffering from insomnia.

When Michael Shannon, 63, of Ocala, Fla., reinjured his back in 2008 he immediately found the closest chiropractor. After the initial 90-minute session, he walked out feeling that it had helped a lot. "It was amazing," Shannon says. After four more chiropractic sessions of about 15 minutes each, along with occasional sessions of massage therapy, he was largely symptom-free. When he feels his back tightening up again, he schedules another adjustment. "It's magical," he says.

One in four respondents undergoing chiropractic treatment for any condition said their chiropractor was more interested and insightful than their medical doctors. More than 30 percent of respondents who had acupuncture felt the same way.

The role of doctors

Our survey found that the wall between conventional doctors and alternative medicine isn't as high as you might assume. Our readers said doctors were generally aware of their use of alternative therapies for their medical conditions.

For instance, 57 percent of people who got Shiatsu massage, usually for back or neck pain, said their doctors knew about it, and so did 81 percent of those who sought chiropractic care.

Sixty-five percent of those who practiced progressive relaxation said their medical caregivers knew about it, as did 68 percent of readers who meditated. A majority of those taking dietary supplements, vitamins, and minerals said their doctors were aware of it.

But doctors were selective in their endorsement of dietary supplements, our survey showed. They tended to point patients toward products with some clinical evidence behind them, such as fish oil for cardiovascular problems, and glucosamine and chondroitin for osteoarthritis.

"We have to be responsible captains of our own health ship," says Avis Brown, 65, of Morgan Hill, Calif., a reader who participated in our survey. "And doctors are our navigators." She said that she received a diagnosis of fibromyalgia about 18 years ago but that massage, meditation, and a sugar-free diet have helped her remain free of symptoms for more than 10 years.

In many cases, a substantial minority of respondents using a particular treatment said their doctors were the ones who had pointed them to it in the first place. Twenty-eight percent of readers who used deep-tissue massage, usually for back or neck pain, said their doctors had recommended it. So did 26 percent of people who used deep-breathing exercises and 21 percent who went to a chiropractor.

Though it's still a rarity, some doctors are adding alternative treatments to their own therapeutic tool kit. Brenda Bourassa, 65, of Winslow, Maine, gets regular acupuncture treatments for her neck pain from Rick Hobbs, M.D., a family physician in nearby Waterville. She says that she was skeptical at first but that the treatments have helped. "I believe that eventually it will eliminate the pain, not just relieve it on a temporary basis," she says.

Hobbs said he became interested in acupuncture in 2004. He now limits his practice mainly to acupuncture and integrative medicine and is president of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture. "People still think of me as a family doctor as well as an acupuncturist," he says. "My patients stuck with me."

Allergy treatments

Though prescription medication was the most helpful [allergy treatment](#), over-the-counter drugs ranked far above any of the other therapies. Seventy-nine percent of herbal-tea users found it to be at least a little helpful (slightly less than



Integrative healing

Avis Brown of Morgan Hill, Calif., says that deep-tissue massage, meditation, and dietary



Under the needle

Rick Hobbs, M.D., uses acupuncture to treat the neck pain of Brenda Bourassa of Winslow, M

the proportion that found it to be at least a little helpful for treating colds). Of the few who tried chiropractic, two in five said it helped a lot despite insufficient evidence for its use.

Allergy treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	48%	72%
Over-the-counter medication	75	52
Chiropractic	2	41
Deep-breathing exercises	3	32
Herbal tea	8	18
Vitamin C	12	17
Multivitamins	13	9

Differences of less than 3 percentage points are not meaningful.

Anxiety treatments

Most have tried prescription drugs and rated them significantly more helpful than all other anxiety treatments, including over-the-counter drugs, the least helpful treatment. Fourteen percent said they were not using any treatments.

Anxiety treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	68%	72%
Yoga	16	46
Meditation	27	42
Deep-breathing exercises	43	34
Over-the-counter medication	7	19

Differences of less than 5 percentage points are not meaningful.

Back-pain treatments

Chiropractic outperformed all other [back-pain treatments](#), and prescription medication rated about the same as deep-tissue massage, yoga, or Pilates. Over-the-counter medication was less helpful than hands-on therapies but performed about the same as progressive relaxation and meditation. (See the results for neck pain.)

What the research says

Most back pain clears up on its own within a month or two. Staying active may curb pain and speed recovery. Acupuncture, chiropractic, and yoga are possibly effective for low-back pain. There might be some benefit to acupressure or meditation, but research is preliminary. A recent expert assessment found that spinal manipulation, exercise, standard medical care, and physical therapy appear to be equally helpful for low-back pain.

Precautions

See a doctor if you have back pain with fever, numbness, weakness, a change in bowel or bladder function, leg-muscle atrophy, a history of cancer, or pain associated with a recent trauma.

Back-pain treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Chiropractic	36%	65%
Prescription medication	38	53
Deep-tissue massage	24	51
Yoga	9	49
Pilates	3	49
Acupressure	3	45
Swedish massage	6	41
Acupuncture	8	41
Shiatsu massage	3	36
Progressive relaxation	3	32
Meditation	5	29
Over-the-counter medication	58	28
Deep-breathing exercises	6	23
Magnesium supplements	4	15
Glucosamine/chondroitin	14	12
Vitamin D	8	10
Calcium supplements	10	9
Fish-oil supplements	10	7
Vitamin C	4	6
Multivitamins	11	5

Differences of less than 5 percentage points are not meaningful.

Cold and flu treatments

Prescription drugs beat a dozen other cold and flu treatments that readers used. Over-the-counter medication ranked as well as deep-breathing exercises and goldenseal. Insufficient clinical evidence exists to support the use of goldenseal or chiropractic for treating colds but there's some evidence that echinacea, vitamin C, and zinc are possibly effective.

Colds, flu, acute bronchitis, and sinusitis treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	42%	77%
Chiropractic	2	47
Over-the-counter medication	21	37

Deep-breathing exercises	3	35
Goldenseal	2	34
Zinc supplements	20	26
Vitamin D	7	23
Vitamin C	32	22
Herbal tea	17	21
Echinacea	10	21
Vitamin B complex	6	20
Fish-oil supplements	6	13
Multivitamins	27	11

Differences of less than 4 percentage points are not meaningful.

Depression treatments

Eight in 10 respondents tried prescription medication, and two-thirds of them said it helped a lot. Around a third who used meditation or yoga rated that treatment highly. Ten percent said they were not using any depression treatments.

Depression treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	80%	69%
Meditation	21	36
Yoga	10	35
Deep-tissue massage	10	28
Deep-breathing exercises	18	22
Over-the-counter medication	7	15
Vitamin B complex	14	13
Fish-oil supplements	15	10
Multivitamins	18	8

Differences of less than 8 percentage points are not meaningful.

Digestive-problem treatments

Most respondents tried prescription medications and found that they helped a lot. Over-the-counter drugs were rated less highly as digestive treatments. [Probiotics](#) got higher marks than [yogurt](#) containing lactobacillus acidophilus.

Digestive-problem treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	64%	69%
Over-the-counter medication	57	42
Probiotics	32	35
Yogurt containing lactobacillus acidophilus	35	20

Differences of less than 4 percentage points are not meaningful.

Fibromyalgia treatments

A majority of readers who used deep-tissue massage or prescription drugs said their chosen fibromyalgia treatments helped a lot. Those who tried chiropractic or deep-breathing exercises said they helped as much as or more than over-the-counter medications.

What the research says

The antidepressants duloxetine (Cymbalta) and milnacipran (Savella), and the anticonvulsant pregabalin (Lyrica) are approved for treating symptoms. Other antidepressants might also help. There's only limited evidence that over-the-counter capsaicin cream reduces pain. Aerobic and strength-training exercises can help. Clinical trials have found that SAME eased symptoms better than placebo, but in our survey, too few fibromyalgia patients used supplements for us to evaluate their helpfulness.

Precautions

See a doctor about widespread pain, extreme tiredness, and poor sleep before they interfere with your daily life.

Fibromyalgia treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Deep-tissue massage	41%	54%
Prescription medication	71	52
Chiropractic	27	35
Deep-breathing exercises	21	26
Over-the-counter medication	49	22

Differences of less than 10 percentage points are not meaningful.

Headache and migraine treatments

Readers rated prescription medications significantly more helpful than all other headache treatments. Most tried over-the-counter drugs, and just more than half said they helped a lot.

Headache treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	43%	77%
Over-the-counter medication	78	51
Chiropractic	15	45

Deep-tissue massage	14	40
Acupuncture	6	34
Acupressure	4	32
Yoga	6	31
Meditation	9	21
Deep-breathing exercises	9	19
Progressive relaxation	5	18
Aromatherapy	4	18
Magnesium supplements	7	15

Differences of less than 3 percentage points are not meaningful.

Insomnia treatments

Almost two-thirds of those who used prescription medication said it helped a lot; only one in five users rated over-the-counter drugs as highly for insomnia treatment. Most who used mind-body practices said they helped at least a little. Insomnia medicines have side effects that may include dependency and worsening sleep problems when abused, misused, or taken too often.

Insomnia treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	51%	64%
Meditation	18	24
Melatonin	33	23
Yoga	9	21
Progressive relaxation	19	20
Over-the-counter medication	45	20
Deep-breathing exercises	23	15

Differences of less than 3 percentage points are not meaningful.

Irritable-bowel-syndrome treatments

Fewer than half of respondents used prescription medication, but most who did said it helped a lot as an IBS treatment. One in three users rated [probiotics](#) highly, but only a small percentage who tried [yogurt](#) containing lactobacillus acidophilus thought it helped.

Irritable-bowel-syndrome treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	43%	59%
Probiotics	44	31

Over-the-counter medication	56	30
Yogurt containing lactobacillus acidophilus	49	17

Differences of less than 3 percentage points are not meaningful.

Neck treatments

Around six in 10 of those who used chiropractic or deep-tissue massage said it helped a lot as a neck treatment. But respondents rated Swedish massage and prescription medication a toss-up. Most people used over-the-counter medication, but only one in four said it helped a lot. And even fewer of those who used supplements thought they were beneficial.

What the research says

Some preliminary evidence suggests that spinal manipulation or a gentler version called mobilization, combined with exercise, can significantly reduce pain. Without exercise, the chiropractic treatments seem ineffective.

Precautions

Neck pain is usually gone within days or weeks. If it lasts longer or gets worse, see a doctor. Chiropractic procedures on the neck have been linked with severe side effects including [stroke](#), which appears to be very rare.

Neck-pain treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Chiropractic	41%	64%
Deep-tissue massage	35	58
Swedish massage	8	51
Prescription medication	33	49
Yoga	10	45
Acupuncture	10	44
Deep-breathing exercises	10	27
Over-the-counter medication	56	25
Glucosamine/chondroitin	13	14
Calcium supplements	11	6
Multivitamins	13	4

Differences of less than 7 percentage points are not meaningful.

Osteoarthritis treatments

Osteoarthritis was the condition respondents were most likely to treat with a combination of prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, and alternative therapies. More than half of the people who tried prescription drugs said they helped a lot as an osteoarthritis treatment. But deep-tissue massage and yoga were rated almost as helpful.

What the research says

Prescription and over-the-counter drugs often provide only partial pain relief. Glucosamine sulfate and SAmE are likely effective in easing pain and improving joint function. Acupuncture is possibly effective. Though there's insufficient evidence on yoga, preliminary research suggests that it might help.

Precautions

See a doctor if you have severe joint pain or disability, or if your joint is red, warm, or swollen.

Osteoarthritis treatments	% who used	% helped a lot
Prescription medication	46%	53%
Deep-tissue massage	14	50
Yoga	6	50
Chiropractic	11	46
Acupuncture	5	46
Over-the-counter medication	65	29
Glucosamine/chondroitin	54	25
Calcium supplements	35	13
Fish oil supplements	28	13
Vitamin D	32	12
Multivitamins	32	6

Differences of less than 3 percentage points are not meaningful.

Guide to the charts

The charts accompanying this report are based on responses to the 2010 Annual Questionnaire conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. The red bars represent the proportion of readers using a treatment for a condition who said it “helped a lot.” Unless otherwise noted, the analysis of research findings came from the Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database, an independent research group, based on the scientific evidence that was current as of June 2011.

Hands-on and mind-body therapies

If you decide to try any of these treatments, talk with your physician first to set realistic expectations for improvement. Survey respondents who said their condition was severe still benefited from these alternative therapies but not quite as much as others.

Many insurers cover acupuncture and chiropractic, and some offer discounts for other treatments. Check with your plan. Some treatments might qualify for reimbursement from your flexible spending or health savings account.

We asked our partners at the Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database, an independent research group, to assess evidence on the alternative therapies. Where given, prices are the average per visit as recorded in the federal government's most recent (2008) Medical Expenditure Panel Survey of a national sample of patients and providers.

Acupuncture and acupressure

These traditional Chinese medicine systems use fine needles or pressure from hands and devices along specific points of the body, purportedly to stimulate and restore healing energy, block pain signals, or release natural chemicals.

Evidence. Acupuncture is possibly effective in reducing pain, including knee pain from osteoarthritis, and relieving nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy; research is too preliminary to rate acupressure's effectiveness.

Find a practitioner. Contact the [American Academy of Medical Acupuncture](#) or the [National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine](#).

Price. \$66 per session for acupuncture; prices on acupressure not available.

Chiropractic

Manipulating or adjusting the spine by applying controlled force, or a gentler mobilization technique, purportedly relieves impingement of spinal nerves, called subluxations, and helps the body heal itself.

Evidence. Chiropractic is possibly effective for back pain. But there's insufficient clinical evidence to rate its effectiveness for neck pain and many other conditions. Our medical experts warn that it might be risky for neck pain.

Find a practitioner. Contact the [American Chiropractic Association](#).

Price. \$71 per visit.

Massage

Swedish massage involves kneading the skin and underlying muscles with deep, circular, rhythmic movements. In Shiatsu, pressure is applied to specific points on the body with fingers and hands. Deep-tissue massage, or Rolfing, involves pressure with knees, elbows, thumbs, fingers, and knuckles.

Evidence. A 2010 expert assessment found that massage in general might be beneficial for low-back pain.

Find a practitioner. Contact the [American Massage Therapy Association](#) or the [National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork](#).

Price. \$60 per hour.

Meditation

Learning to focus one's attention to achieve a state of greater calm and physical relaxation. Techniques include body postures, mantras, and breathing exercises.

Evidence. Possibly effective for stress reduction.

Find a practitioner. For stress-management programs, check local hospitals and nearby medical schools. Or teach yourself with a book or audiotape. The [Meditation Society of America](#) posts free instructional information.

Price. Variable.

Yoga

This practice usually involves various postures, breathing exercises, and meditation. Some practitioners specialize in back pain.

Evidence. Possibly effective for low-back pain, depression, and pregnancy discomfort.

Find a practitioner. Contact your local yoga studio or fitness center. Information about yoga therapists can be found at [The International Association of Yoga Therapists](#).

Price. Variable.

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