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Alternative Medicine: The Issues

Physicians practicing conventional Western medicine at times see alternative medicine as unproven, worthless, perhaps even dangerous, steeped only in anecdotal case histories. Some view the alternative therapist as being naïve at best, a charlatan at worst.

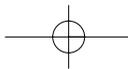
A provider of alternative medicine may see conventional physicians as so focused on a disease or body part that they have no humanity, no compassion, and lack concern for the whole person. The conventional physician has been called a money-loving individual, in bed with pharmaceutical companies, who is out to take the life savings of the ill and infirm.

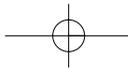
A truly accurate picture of both sides is a lot more complicated. But you need to understand the benefits and the dangers of alternative medicine before you make any serious mistakes.

What Is an Alternative Therapy?

The simplest definition of an alternative therapy is any therapy that is not accepted by the dominant medical establishment in a given culture. While the definition of alternative medicine can vary, there are some general characteristics and principles that most agree on.

- Alternative therapies are those approaches to healing that physicians and hospitals in the United States are unlikely to provide for their patients. The dominant medical establishment tends to look with disfavor (or disgust) on certain therapies and labels them “alternatives.” Alternative medicine claims to have been pushed aside by practitioners of conventional medicine for reasons of political or financial gain.
- Practitioners of alternative medicine generally stress their holistic approach to health care—treating the body, the mind, and the spirit—relying on noninvasive “natural” methods of healing with an emphasis on prevention of disease. Although conventional medicine can be holistic as well, medical physicians frequently do not stress that fact.
- Some alternative therapies refer to the spirit in ways that are alien to Christianity. Unless you understand the roots of a particular therapy, you may find yourself





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involved in a practice with a theology dangerously different from what Jesus taught or what he would have us follow.

- Much in alternative medicine has little quality scientific evidence to support its assertions of healing. However, as we shall show, some therapies have excellent scientific support, yet are not utilized by many conventional Western physicians. Other therapies, with proper testing, might gain proof of the value claimed. Without such proof, no one, not even the experts in alternative medicine, knows for certain whether the untested, unproven alternative therapies actually have healed anyone or not. All we know is that patients relate how they were helped, or how they entered long-term remission, or were cured after using some unproven alternative therapy.

Before you embark on any path that takes you into the world of alternative medicine, even if it's just to buy an herbal remedy that's being recommended by a friend, you need to investigate the realities of alternative medicine—the costs and the risks you might face as well as the benefits.

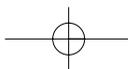
Our purpose in this book is to point out the benefits, explain the risks, anticipate your questions, and provide objective answers. We will show how conventional medicine has evolved over the centuries, how what we commonly call “alternative therapies” have come to exist, and the background for the various therapies and remedies. And we'll look at what the use of alternative therapies could mean for a Christian.

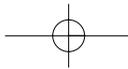
In part 4 we discuss each of the most popular alternative therapies available today in North America. This section lists not only what exists but also gives the origins, effectiveness, and any reasons for caution and concern. We also give you detailed information on herbal remedies, vitamins, and dietary supplements, since these are used as a form of self-help available without much direction in health food stores, most drugstores, many supermarkets, and even on the Internet. Here, too, you'll be able to read our recommendations along with any cautions and concerns.

Conventional Medicine Takes an Interest in Alternative Medicine

As more research is done, we believe that conventional medicine and alternative medicine will increasingly be used together. Some alternative therapy specialists recognize the potential of a holistic approach in contemporary conventional medicine and work in tandem with medical physicians to give high quality care. And many conventional medicine practitioners recognize that one or more alternative therapies might benefit their patients when used in tandem with surgery and pharmaceuticals.

Increasing numbers of doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals are incorporating the best of both approaches into what is called “integrative medicine.”²¹ Professional continuing medical education (CME) courses also are providing information on alternative medicine. In fact, some of the most popular CME courses for doctors, nurses, and pharmacists





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focus specifically on alternative medicine. Pharmacies are increasingly making alternative remedies available, although natural or health food stores, the Internet, and mail-order companies still account for most of these sales. According to a 1994 study, homeopathic preparations were being stocked by 69 percent of chain drugstores and by 3,000 independent pharmacies, accounting for annual sales at the time of about \$100 million.²

Interest Grows Among Christians

Interest among Christians appears to mirror—and sometimes exceed—this general trend. Christian radio stations carry advertisements for herbal remedies and nutritional supplements even more commonly than the secular media. Specific “Christian” alternative therapies are promoted. One entrepreneur claimed to have figured out the recipe for manna and alleged it would protect people from all forms of illness, just as the original manna protected the Israelites in the wilderness. Another is the “Genesis 1:29 Diet” based on God’s declaration that “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.” Believers in this diet teach that people will be most healthy when eating a vegetarian diet.

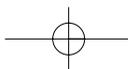
Some Christians claim to have found particular ways to cure or alleviate cancer.³ One prominent Christian author has written about the benefits he experienced from an alternative cancer therapy available only in Europe.⁴ We frequently hear his case mentioned to encourage Christian involvement in alternative medicine. Research studies on prayer and religious faith have been published in mainstream medical journals. Although some of what is called “prayer” is very different from the prayer described in the Bible, some Christians now claim the power of prayer is supported by scientific research.

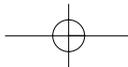
NIH Begins Evaluation of Alternative Medicine Treatments

In 1992, the National Institutes of Health began an evaluation of alternative medical treatments, establishing the Office of Alternative Medicine (since renamed The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine). It has made grants available to a number of prominent universities and major medical centers to encourage both research and teaching of alternative medicine. In response, many medical schools and nursing schools have added courses in alternative therapies.

At least eight new journals devoted to alternative medicine were launched in the late 1990s, with their primary audience being physicians and other health care professionals. Well-established professional journals increasingly publish articles about alternative medicine. Some have even devoted entire issues to the topic, such as the November 1998 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Even medical insurance and managed-care companies have started to pay for some alternative therapies. In fact, by the end of 1998 an estimated 58 percent of major health maintenance organizations (HMOs) were covering some types of alternative medicine.⁵





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Alternative Medicine Has Become Big Business

Despite the problems and concerns about alternative medicine, which you will learn about in this book, Americans are increasingly spending their money on alternative medicine. A frequently cited survey reported that in 1990 Americans spent between \$9.4 billion and \$13.2 billion on alternative therapies.⁶ When this survey was repeated in 1997, expenditures had mushroomed to between \$17.2 billion and \$24.6 billion. Additionally, \$5.1 billion was spent on herbal medicine, and \$4.7 billion on therapy-specific books, classes, and equipment, bringing the total out-of-pocket expenses to somewhere between \$27 billion and \$34.4 billion.⁷ Americans also spend about \$12 billion annually on dietary supplements, with these sales growing each year by about 20 percent.⁸ At this writing, the industry has become even stronger, much of the increase related to aging baby boomers and a younger population increasingly focused on wellness and looking for solutions outside mainstream medical practice.

The manufacturer of one herbal product alone, Metabolife 356®, a dieting product, was estimated in one review of the product to have sales in 1999 approaching \$1 billion.⁹ This review also noted that it was unable to locate any of the usual peer-reviewed, published research required of pharmaceutical companies to indicate that a product actually works and is safe.

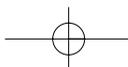
Risks in Alternative Medicine Are Real and Sometimes Dangerous

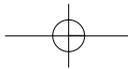
In spite of all the interest in alternative medicine, the unquestioned reliance on unproven alternative therapies can have tragic results, especially for patients who try alternative therapies before seeking conventional help.

The harsh reality of delaying conventional treatment was obvious for a woman named Hazel (in this book, the cases are real; the names and some of the details, such as age or sex, may have been changed to protect the patient's confidentiality). She came to the office after nearly two years of trying a variety of alternative medicine treatments for a shoulder ailment. Her chronic bursitis was easily and quickly diagnosed using only a brief history, a physical exam, and an X-ray. An injection of a nonabsorbable steroid into the bursa—a common and proven conventional treatment—gave Hazel full use of her crippled shoulder within fifteen minutes. Hazel cried, realizing she had needlessly suffered chronic pain all those months while trying alternative therapies.

An even greater tragedy occurred with Brenda. I first became involved with Brenda's care after she was brought to the emergency room while having a seizure. The MRI (a diagnostic imaging test) showed cancer had spread to the brain and bones. Brenda told how for more than a year she had worried about a growing lump in one breast. She had thought it merely part of her fibrocystic breast condition, an annoying ailment though not dangerous.

Brenda had gone to her local health food store where the well-intentioned owner recommended a number of nutritional therapies and dietary supplements. Brenda also saw a local alternative medicine practitioner who, without even examining her, recommended other alternative therapies.





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Days passed, then weeks. The lump continued to grow. By the time I saw Brenda, a young woman in her twenties, there would be no cure, no happy ending. I could only try to relieve her pain, her guilt and suffering, and comfort her as her family, the staff, and I helplessly watched her life fade away.

The outcome might have been the same with early conventional medical therapy. But medical literature is filled with well-documented proof that early detection and intervention in breast cancer frequently results in cure. Brenda probably died prematurely because she put her trust and faith in unproven alternative therapies suggested by those not trained in medical diagnosis. Although both of these patients were sincere in their beliefs about alternative medicine, they were sincerely wrong.

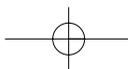
Unfortunately, these types of stories are not uncommon. A researcher for the Research Council for Complementary Medicine in London, England, visited twenty-nine health food stores in London asking advice for her numerous and severe headaches.¹⁰ The symptoms were chosen so that a trained professional would easily recognize them as suggesting a brain tumor or other serious problem. The researcher was told by the health food store employees that her headaches were caused by the flu, low blood sugar, tension, the weather, or using her brain too much. Forty-two different therapies were recommended, with no consistency in the advice given. At fewer than one in four of the stores was the researcher advised to see a physician.

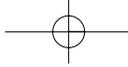
In another study in Hawaii, a researcher visited forty health food stores stating she was gathering information on herbal remedies for her mother, whose advanced breast cancer had spread throughout her body (metastasized).¹¹ In 90 percent of the stores, employees recommended various products to cure cancer, even though making such a claim is against the law. Shark cartilage was by far the most popular remedy, recommended at almost half the stores. Of great concern also is that almost one-fifth of the employees counseled against the use of conventional cancer therapy. We'll discuss the lack of evidence that shark cartilage cures cancer.

It is only fair to point out the many similar stories told by alternative medicine advocates, of how a large, noncaring, conventional medical system caused harm to patients. They cite pharmaceutical horror stories—thalidomide given to pregnant women to treat nausea that resulted in babies born with serious birth defects, including missing or shortened arms or legs. They relate how mass inoculation against the swine flu virus resulted in serious illness, even death. They tell of people who have become overly dependent on the latest tranquilizer or sedative. They note that wonder drugs, such as Viagra® to treat impotence, have been linked to heart attacks. They tell how people die every year from medication mistakes in hospitals and from prescription errors. And they are right. Conventional medicine is not perfect. It is a human enterprise where practitioners are always learning, where they sometimes make mistakes.

What the proponents of alternative medicine rarely, if ever, reveal to those seeking advice are the Brendas and Hazels from their past—those who suffered and even died needlessly.

With this book, we want you to become as wise as a serpent about the risks and benefits of conventional and alternative medicine. We don't want you to continue to merely ask the practitioners of conventional or alternative medicine, "What do you recommend?" or "What do you think is best?" We want you to learn how to ask, "What is the evidence that supports





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what you recommend?” We want you to wisely learn how to gather the information you need for the decisions you must make about your health. Jonathan Swift, the great eighteenth-century Irish satirist, summed up our concerns beautifully: “Falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after; so that when men come to be undeceived it is too late: the jest is over and the tale has had its effect.”

Proof of Effectiveness Is Missing for Alternative Therapies

When the truth comes out, that most alternative therapies have little or no compelling clinical evidence to support their effectiveness or safety, most of the people we talk to are stunned. The evidence that does exist is often ambiguous or based on seriously flawed studies. In some cases the “proof” that a therapy is effective is based on controversial interpretations of scientific theories. For many therapies, the only evidence offered is a group of anecdotal reports—the testimony of users of the therapy.

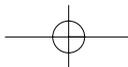
Perhaps even worse is the way the popular media introduce alternative medicine concepts. As soon as a new therapy begins to show some positive results in some people, reports in the popular media promote it as though it has been proven. The fact that the idea may be wrong, that coincidence is more likely the reason for the positive result, is not mentioned. Instead, we see the touting of a cancer cure, a diabetes cure, or something similar based on very preliminary evidence and supposition.

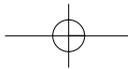
Coenzyme Q₁₀ is a good example of such a media blitz. Coenzyme Q₁₀ at one time was one of the most popular of the newer dietary supplements. Physicians and researchers knew that Coenzyme Q₁₀ is a critical factor in generating energy in all living organisms. They also knew that the aged and those with a number of different ailments have a reduction in levels of Coenzyme Q₁₀. Therefore, some alternative practitioners reasoned, if a person took Coenzyme Q₁₀ as part of a regimen of daily nutritional supplements, it might slow or stop the aging process and the person would be assured of better health.

Soon they were touting this theory as fact. Coenzyme Q₁₀ became a “must have” nutritional supplement. There was even talk that it could combat or reduce the severity of AIDS. Then long-term, carefully controlled studies began to be conducted. Now, at this writing, it has been noted in the University of California, Berkeley, *Wellness Letter* for April 2000 that there is no proof to support this theory. It’s true that Coenzyme Q₁₀ is critical for energy, and that it is lacking in the aged and many of the infirm. It may even provide a little benefit for those with heart problems. But the supplement is nothing like the “fountain of youth” it was originally advertised to be. Yet countless consumers, many Christians included, wasted millions of dollars because of premature claims made about Coenzyme Q₁₀.

Alternative Therapies Lack Adequate Regulation

Most European countries strictly regulate the manufacture and sale of herbal and other botanical products. In Germany, the Federal Health Agency set up what became known as





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Commission E to evaluate the safety, efficacy, and quality of herbal products. Although the Federal Health Agency does not test herbal products, manufacturers are required to submit proof of a product's quality, safety, and effectiveness. Each product's license must be renewed every five years. Similar procedures must be followed for herbal and conventional drugs, although the type of evidence used to support an herb's safety and effectiveness is different from the requirements for a conventional drug.

Once established, Commission E functioned independently of the Federal Health Agency. From 1978 to 1994, Commission E reviewed all available literature on the safety and efficacy of 360 herbal remedies. These technical reports were published and are now available in English.¹² In countries with regulations like these, consumers are assured of the consistency and safety of what they purchase—and they have some confidence that the claims made about the substance are accurate.

Unfortunately, this is not true in the United States, as there are no such standards or regulations. The consumer not only has no guarantee of the safety or efficacy of what they purchase, in many cases they can't even be sure that the amount of the herb or other active ingredient indicated on the label is actually there.

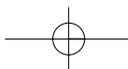
- Some products don't contain the ingredients listed on the labels.¹³
- Others contain dangerous chemicals or pharmaceuticals not listed on the label.¹⁴
- Significant differences exist in the same product from different manufacturers (or even from the same manufacturer).¹⁵
- Different brands of some products contain dramatically different amounts of the active ingredients.¹⁶

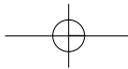
For example, the *Los Angeles Times* commissioned a study to examine St. John's wort,¹⁷ an herb known to be effective against some forms of mild to moderate general depression. *Times* reporters purchased the ten most common brands from several retail outlets, then had the pills tested by an independent laboratory.

The results were startling. Only one had between 90 and 110 percent of what the label indicated (an acceptable standard for over-the-counter products, based on the German standards). One manufacturer's pills had only 20 percent of the amount of active ingredient claimed on the label. Two others had a third *more* than the labels claimed.

Alternative Therapies Are Often Based on Ancient or Traditional Cultures

The ancient or traditional cultures with which many of these therapies are associated have been viewed through romantic lenses, their lifestyles seen as healthier than modern, fast-paced ones. The medicines, especially the herbs, used for centuries in these cultures would, it is claimed, never have gained acceptance if they were not effective. Thus, the therapies are declared by the proponents of alternative medicine to be valid. Some champions of a product





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will claim that their therapies were suppressed for years by Western imperialism and Christian missionary crusades. Only now, they say, are they being rediscovered and made available in the West.

Some of the more vigorous supporters of alternative medicine see many of the concerns about alternative medicine as the dying gasps of Western culture's two dominant institutions: science and Christianity. They claim that research on these therapies is lacking because of the biases of Western medical and pharmaceutical establishments. The claim has been made that the pharmaceutical industry will not research herbal remedies because it cannot patent the products and hence cannot make as much money from them. Conventional medicine, they claim, is only concerned with retaining power and market share.

Alternative medicine partisans advocate giving individuals the freedom to choose whatever form of health care they want. The argument is made that people's responsibility to care for their own health should be acknowledged and promoted by giving the individual greater freedom in matters of health care. They view those seeking to regulate alternative medicine, such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM), with suspicion.

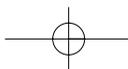
Spiritual Part of Some Therapies Is a Problem for Christians

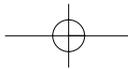
For Christians, there is another concern. Some alternative therapies are based on practices and rituals that have long been part of pagan traditions or other religious practices.

Spirituality is an important concept in alternative medicine. Unfortunately, the word *spirituality* may mean one thing to Christians and quite another to someone who practices therapies such as traditional Chinese medicine or India's Ayurvedic medicine. They both incorporate herbal remedies, meditation, and relaxation, with traditional Chinese medicine also using acupuncture and other therapies. Each system also has a very distinct world view based on the religious ideas commonly accepted in those cultures.

Some Christians have expressed the valid concern that some forms of alternative medicine may be vehicles for the promotion of a variety of religious perspectives, many of them opposed to Christianity, while other forms may actually involve occult practices. These concerns have been reinforced by *New Age Journal* editors who view the increased interest in alternative medicine as the most significant change contributing to the redefining of American culture.¹⁸

One of the central tenets believed by many in the New Age movement is that all spirituality is good, that no form is any better than another.¹⁹ This is in opposition to the consistent message of the Bible that many problems people have originate, either directly or indirectly, in the conflict between the spiritual forces of good and evil. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."





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Thus the “openness” advocated by many in the alternative medicine community could expose people to spiritual beings and practices whose primary concern is to harm people and lead them away from the loving Father of the Universe. Although some question the existence of evil spiritual forces, the Bible describes Satan as “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44) and warns Christians that “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Practitioners of alternative therapies frequently speak of the “spiritual” part of what they do. Some are devout Christians, while others believe in practices whose world view is radically different from biblically based beliefs. Both sides use some of the same terms, but the meanings are quite different.

For example, Therapeutic Touch (see page 275) seems, on the surface, to be related to the laying on of hands. The practitioners claim to be following in this tradition after removing the religious context from the practice. However, the nurse who helped develop the practice is a Buddhist and admits that the principles behind Therapeutic Touch are the three main principles of Buddhist teachings.²⁰

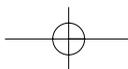
Some alternative medicine practitioners believe they cannot help their patients without first introducing them to one or another of the ancient Eastern or New Age faith systems. This leads to potential conflict for Christians. They may hear anecdotal stories from friends about shamanism (see page 269) easing arthritis pain without drugs, Therapeutic Touch increasing the speed of healing after a severe burn, and Reiki (see page 266) easing a chronic health condition. The stories are positive. Nothing is said about the spiritual side of the treatments. But are they safe?

Some pastors might say that many of these therapies go against biblical teaching. They may even warn that some alternative therapies lead to involvement in the occult. But others teach that ultimately all healing comes from God. They emphasize that Jesus is called the “Great Physician.” They point out that in his day, Jesus would have been considered an alternative healer. Both perspectives can’t be right.

What to Do When Considering an Alternative Therapy

In the midst of this debate, most people, including physicians, are left confused and frustrated. People with health problems don’t want philosophical or political debates; they want relief. They just want to know what they can and should do. Christians also want to please God in their actions, base their beliefs on his Word, the Bible, and reflect his character in the decisions they make.

We should all be concerned about our health. We should know why we are using whatever therapies or remedies we do use. We need to know that a particular remedy is not only effective but reasonably safe—that the label on the bottle is accurate and reliable. We need to know the costs, risks, and benefits of the choices available to us. Recommendations and experiences of certain people can be an important part of any evaluation; but these are not enough.



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We should all investigate the claims made about the remedies we put into our bodies, the therapies we allow to be practiced on us, and the practitioners in whom we place our trust. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Gather objective background information, weigh the options, and make as informed a decision as possible.

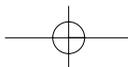
This investigation should be done whether we are pursuing conventional or alternative medicine. Yet with both forms of medical care, we see people trusting blindly in someone or something for no reason other than the chance happenings that led them to a certain practitioner.

We must also evaluate remedies from an investment, or stewardship, perspective. We are all limited in the amount of time and money available to us. We should not waste or squander our resources. Christians, especially, are called to be accountable stewards of these resources. Jesus asked, “So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” (Luke 16:11).

For us as Christians, then, we must evaluate whether our pursuit of alternative medicine is motivated by the values of our culture or by godly reasons. This book is intended to help you make these decisions.

Notes

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