

# Tips for Nurses: Complementary Therapies



**What it is:** Complementary therapies (CT) are often used alongside conventional medical treatments but have not been developed using the same evidence approaches. CT cover a variety of practices and physical therapies including aromatherapy, acupressure, herbal medicine, and massage therapy.

**Why it matters:** CT are often used in Australia. Therefore, patients who transition to palliative care may already be using CTs or may wish to start to use CTs.

Nurses can support a person's preferences and help them to avoid CT that may interfere with medications or cause harm. It is important to know what is being used.

**What I need to know:** Palliative care patients may use CT to relieve physical symptoms, help control treatment side effects and/ or improve their psychological well-being. Evidence to support CT use is emerging for some approaches but unclear for others.

Nutritional supplements are a form of CT covered by guidelines and can be associated with drug interactions or adverse events. The range of mind-body CT practices used by people with life-limiting illness includes massage, music therapy, art therapy, aromatherapy, acupressure, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, meditation, reflexology, and reiki. The person's relationship with the complementary therapist can be important. CT benefits may be uncertain or short-lived but can provide the opportunity for the person to 'escape' or 'live in the moment' and therefore reduce their worries about their disease and future.

## Actions

CT is a very personal choice. Have open and non-judgemental discussions.

**Record information** about the CT that people in your care are using.

**Remember** that most people are waiting to be asked before they disclose their use of CT.

**You may wish to ask** 'have you tried anything else like herbal or natural remedies to help?'

If so:

- Have you noticed any benefit?
- Have you noticed any side effects?

**Suggest** they keep a diary of how they feel while using the CT.

**Ask** if they would like help to understand any information about the CT.

**Lifestyle coordinators** have an important role in making people comfortable and may be able to help with some approaches to CT.

## Tools

**Visit** CareSearch website: [www.caresearch.com.au](http://www.caresearch.com.au)

**Talking with your patients about complementary medicine** - a resource for clinicians (NHMRC).

**Name:**

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What complementary therapies do I use for myself?

What questions can I ask to find out what therapies a person I care for is using or wanting to use?

**My notes:**

See related palliAGED Practice  
Tip Sheets:  
Pain Management  
Person-Centred Care  
Talking About Dying

For references and the latest version of all the Tip Sheets visit  
[www.palliaged.com.au](http://www.palliaged.com.au)

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