

August 2005

Which alternative treatments work?

Alternative medicine has come of age. Nearly half of the 34,000 readers that we surveyed nationally for this report had tried some form of nontraditional treatment during the past two years, and their doctors were likely to have approved of it or even suggested it.

However, results show that for the 12 conditions we covered, ranging from depression to high blood pressure, alternative treatments, especially herbs and supplements, were usually far less effective than prescription drugs and even exercise. Although some readers said alternatives made them feel “much better,” many more said they helped only “somewhat,” indicating that most alternatives may make more sense as an adjunct to conventional care than as a primary cure.

The exceptions were two hands-on alternative treatments, chiropractic and **deep-tissue massage**. Chiropractic was ranked ahead of all conventional treatments, including prescription drugs, by readers with back pain. (Readers said it also provided relief for neck pain, but, as we note later, neck manipulation can be risky.) **Deep-tissue massage** was found to be especially effective in treating osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, a painful musculoskeletal syndrome that conventional medicine often remains at a loss to treat.

Readers also reported good results for exercise, not only for conditions such as back pain, but also for allergies and other respiratory ills, anxiety, rheumatoid arthritis, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, insomnia, and prostate problems. Those results are consistent with a broad range of clinical studies of treatments for all of these conditions except allergies and respiratory ailments.

Six years ago, when we last asked our readers about alternative, a.k.a. complementary, medicine, we found evidence that medical doctors were becoming increasingly likely to accept it. Our new survey found that for readers who recently used alternative medicine, nearly 75 percent told their doctors about it. Most doctors approved; 25 percent of those readers said their doctor suggested the alternative in the first place. Topping the list of doctor-recommended treatments were glucosamine/chondroitin (for joint pain), **deep-tissue massage** (for musculoskeletal ailments), and saw palmetto (for prostate problems).

Our survey also suggests that patients themselves are becoming increasingly sophisticated about alternative care. They're more likely to concentrate on treatments that at least some studies have indicated can help their medical condition.

And studies of alternatives are on the rise. In 1999, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a then-fledgling component of the mighty National Institutes of Health, awarded its first research grant. In the fiscal year that just ended, the center funded 329 projects, ranging from yoga's effect on insomnia to ginseng's effect on glucose intolerance.

But a rise in acceptance and research doesn't mean alternatives help. So in our 2004 Annual Questionnaire, we asked readers to rate the effectiveness of conventional and alternative treatments they used for their two most problematic conditions over the past two years. We asked whether each treatment helped a lot, somewhat, a little, or not at all. See [The healing touch](#) for results for conditions for which alternative medicine worked best. Results for conditions for which conventional medicine worked best are listed in [When drugs work better](#).

We also conducted a separate, online survey of 10,000 women about conventional and alternative treatments for symptoms of menopause. See [Hormone alternatives for menopause](#) for the results.

Respondents based their opinions of a treatment's effectiveness on personal experience, not laboratory measurements, so the results can't be compared to scientific clinical trials. Nor do our results take into account the placebo effect--the tendency of people to feel better after simulated medical intervention. But they do provide information that's missing from most studies of conventional and alternative methods--namely, how patients themselves rated different treatments for the same conditions. Some key findings:

- *Consumer Reports* subscribers, who tend to be older, wealthier, and better educated than the population at large, are enthusiastic users of alternative medicine, not only to treat specific problems but also to maintain overall health. Forty-seven percent of respondents had tried an alternative remedy during the past two years, a higher percentage than that found by other large-scale surveys.
- Even some herbs and supplements that had proved modestly effective in clinical trials ranked low in our readers' estimation. For instance, of 10 treatments that readers had tried for osteoarthritis, glucosamine ranked 9th.
- Readers were much more likely to try alternative remedies for conditions that don't have effective conventional treatments. Eighty-four percent used only conventional treatments for respiratory problems, for which effective prescription and over-the-counter drugs are available. By contrast, 60 percent of readers with fibromyalgia used a combination of conventional and alternative therapies.
- Across the board, women were more likely than men to have tried and liked hands-on alternative treatments such as **massage**, chiropractic, and acupuncture.

CR Quick Take

Alternative medicine is no longer truly alternative. Our survey of more than 34,000 readers reveals that many people have tried it, and more and more doctors are recommending it.

- Readers gave the highest marks to hands-on treatments. They worked better than conventional treatments for conditions such as back pain and arthritis, which cause significant discomfort yet don't have reliable conventional cures.
- Well-known, heavily promoted herbal treatments such as echinacea, St. John's wort, and saw palmetto didn't work well for readers.
- A separate survey on menopause found that a large minority of women have turned from hormone replacement, which can be risky, to black cohosh, soy supplements, and vitamin E for relief from hot flashes. However, those alternatives were far less effective.