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ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE: ALTERNATIVES TO WHAT?'

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Hot topic these days: Alternative medicine. The question might be: what is it or what does that mean? The answer: alternative medicine has become the catch all phrase for non-traditional therapies, ones that are not usually prescribed by physicians trained in American and European medical schools. But the first questions probably should be, why are these alternative approaches and why are they so discussed? And that actually may be easier to understand.

Severe diseases like Crohn's and colitis cause enormous amounts of suffering. Debilitating pain and/or bowel problems interfere with peoples' lives. I don't need to remind you of that. You or one of your loved ones is reminded every single day. And the medicines don't always seem to work the way they are supposed to, or if they do there are side effects or the threat that they'll stop working. Or there's the painful surgery or perhaps a whole string of operations over the years gradually reworking and shortening bowel length.

What if I told you I could make you better or lessen the devastating impact of some of your symptoms? You'd probably listen. What if I told you that all you'd have to do is take an herb or a vitamin supplement daily. You'd want to know more, even if I told you, "Well, I don't actually know that it will help, but someone on the internet's aunt's second cousin's brother took this for awhile and he got better." Matter of fact, I'm willing to bet that if I said, "Sitting in the bathroom with the lights off while you swing a plucked chicken over your head helps some patients"-someone desperate enough might sneak off in the middle of the night to try. Nothing to lose and everything to gain, he or she would argue.

So why not an herb, an oil, a vitamin, a mineral, a massage, an adjustment? Seems safer than those awful medicines my doctor prescribes and a whole lot better than surgery.

The problem isn't that alternative medicine has become a multimillion-dollar industry promoting products to do anything or everything. The problem is that there isn't enough research to indicate what works and what is nothing more than a colorful old wives tale.



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The people recommending them on the internet aren't necessarily trained in anything. They are often passing along anecdotal stories or theorizing from their computer terminals.

Pharmaceuticals companies are required to document numerous studies that prove the efficacy of the medications they release. Minerals, vitamins and herbs require none. They go on the shelf without regulation to assure their safety, not even to guarantee the potency of what's inside. Former FDA Commissioner, Dr. David Kessler, was quoted recently in the Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin, "The good news is that dietary supplements don't kill people, although there may be misleading claims and even fraud."

Now that I've given you that warning, you are not going to believe what I have to say next. I, a physician trained in Western medicine, actually think, believe, or at least, hope that some of these herbs and vitamins may work. I take my daily antioxidants and vitamins to ward off heart disease and deficiencies since I admit I don't eat as well as I should sometimes, no matter how hard I try. I admit that I've discussed alternatives with patients when traditional medications haven't worked. But unfortunately our different trials of fish oil, vitamins, and gamma globulin injections haven't worked much better. Yes they are worth a try—but under supervision, because there can be side effects. Consider the old standards, that have taken us generations to understand: Vitamin C can cause diarrhea: A in excess can cause liver disease and increase pressure on the brain: calcium can cause kidney stones. And those are the ones we know. I'm afraid that many of the people selling herbs don't know much about their hazards.

We need to accumulate real information about these supplements in meaningful ways, using science and statistics, not mere suggestions. And in the mean time, you can make sure that you are correcting any nutritional deficiencies with guidance, and understand that you need to take what you read on the internet and hear from your neighbor with a bucket of salt. And bottom line, you need to know that alternative medicines and therapies may offer some benefit, but they may contain some real risk as well.