Alternative and complementary diet therapies

It is important to eat a well balanced diet to provide you with all the nutrients that you need to keep your body working well.

What is the difference between alternative and complementary therapies?

**Alternative** refers to a change to your usual lifestyle, which claims to treat or cure cancer, and is often followed *instead of* medical treatment.

**Complementary** refers to any unusual or unorthodox change to your usual lifestyle, which claims to benefit patients with cancer, and is often followed *in association with* accepted cancer treatments, such as radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

As there are extensive lists of alternative and complementary diet therapies it is impossible to list them all, so the most common ones are listed below. A few diet therapies can fall into both categories i.e. can be followed instead of medical treatment or followed in association with medical treatment.

- **Gerson Therapy**: this involves following a strict regimen of coffee enemas, juice of raw fruits and vegetables, and a vegan diet (i.e. excluding meat, fish, dairy products and eggs), which is also low in fat and salt.

- **Macrobiotics**: this involves following a vegan diet, which is also low in fat and salt. Each meal should contain at least 50% wholegrain cereals, such as granary bread, Weetabix, All-bran and large quantities of raw vegetables.

- **The Bristol Diet developed at the Penny Brohn Cancer Centre (formerly The Bristol Cancer Help Centre)**: the programme advises patients to avoid many types of food, including red meat, fats, dairy products, sugar, preservatives, additives and caffeine. It recommends that food should be organic and based on whole foods and cereals.

- **Shark cartilage**: this is taken from spiny dogfish sharks and hammerhead sharks. It is supposed to work by blocking the development of new blood vessels and therefore, starving the cancer. So far, scientific studies have found no evidence that this slows the growth of the cancer or that it cures it.

- **Other common diet therapies** include Issels treatment (raw food treatment), Bromelain (natural enzyme in pineapple) and laetrile therapy (apricot kernels).

- **Some of the most common herbal therapies** include Mistletoe (trade name ‘iscador’), Ginger, Essiac, Evening Primrose Oil, Green Tea, Milk Thistle, Spirulina and Cat’s-Claw. These are taken orally or as injections.

- **Megadoses of vitamins, minerals and trace elements**: these can be taken as tonics or tablets. The amount taken exceeds the required recommended daily allowance.
What to do if you are considering or following one of these therapies

- The choice to follow an alternative or complementary therapy is your own; however, you should make your doctor aware of what you are doing.
- If you are considering following one of the above, you should discuss it with your doctor in case it interacts with your treatment.
- If you are considering one of the diets, ask to be referred to an Oncology Dietitian who will discuss it with you and ensure that your diet is well balanced and appropriate to your needs.

What are the problems associated with these therapies?

- There is little evidence to support the above claims. By following one of these therapies you may cause yourself more harm than good, as they can affect your nutritional intake and may have a detrimental effect on your nutritional status.
- You may suffer with nausea, tiredness and/or a poor appetite due to your condition or its treatment. Following a restrictive diet may lead to additional weight loss and nutritional deficiencies eg. avoiding dairy foods can lead to a reduction in calcium intake.
- High doses of vitamins, minerals and trace elements may be harmful to your body and can possibly interact with your medical treatment.

Further information

The Oncology Dietitians work alongside the medical team to provide information to support your diet. Please see our ‘Diet and cancer’ leaflet and the Food Standards Agency booklet ‘The Eatwell Plate’, which are available from staff.

Dietetic Department
Telephone: 01332 785573

Macmillan Information Centre
Telephone: 01332 786008
Email: cancerinformation@derbyhospitals.nhs.uk

Cancer Research UK
Telephone: 020 7121 6699
Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Food Standards Agency
Telephone: 020 7276 8829
Website: www.food.gov.uk

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