

# ***Quick Guide to Supplements, Herbs, and Alternative Medicine***

**An information sheet from the Kentucky Council Against Health Fraud  
[www.kcahf.org](http://www.kcahf.org)**

This sheet summarizes information contained in our other handouts.  
Please see the individual handouts for more information.

## ***Dietary Supplements***

Government regulation of dietary supplements is very loose, and many products are sold that probably are of little or no benefit (or which may be harmful). There is considerable scientific research concerning the possible benefits of some supplements. See our handout for the latest information on popular products.

For further information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/DSH/supps herbs.html>

## ***Herbal Remedies***

Herbs are regulated along with dietary supplements, which means they can be sold even though most have not been shown to be useful. It is important to realize that *herbs are drugs*, and can have dangerous side effects or interfere with other medications you may be using. If you want to use herbal remedies, be sure to discuss them with your physician. Avoid using herbs if you are pregnant or nursing, and do not give them to children. Some herbs are contaminated with dangerous chemicals. You also cannot be sure of what dose you are getting, since the contents vary greatly among different products. See our handout for discussion of the scientific evidence concerning the most popular herbs. *Dangerous* herbs include chaparral, comfrey, ephedra (ma huang), lobelia, yohimbe, and possibly kava.

For further information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/herbs.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/paraherbalism.html>

## ***Diets and Weight Loss***

Various dietary supplements are being sold to aid weight loss. In general, these have not been shown to be effective, and some of them are dangerous.

The low-carbohydrate diets have attracted much attention in recent years. Although some research studies support their use, we still do not know if they are safe and effective if followed for many years. The best long-term way to lose weight is to increase your exercise while you change your eating patterns.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/PhonyAds/weightlossfraud.html>

## ***Unconventional Cancer Treatments***

Many unconventional treatments are being promoted to the public, some of them given in Mexican clinics. None of them have been shown to be useful. Substituting an “alternative” treatment for conventional therapy will decrease your chances of survival. See our handout for discussions of the more popular of these methods.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/00AboutQuackwatch/altseek.html>

### ***Chiropractic***

There is some evidence that chiropractic is useful for back pain, but not for any other medical condition. Many chiropractors believe that they correct “subluxations” which interfere with nerve functions and the health of the entire body, but this is contrary to scientific knowledge. Some chiropractors use devices and methods of diagnosis which are unscientific.

For more information, see:

<http://www.chirobase.org>

### ***Massage***

Massage may be useful in dealing with pain (especially back pain), or just to help you relax and feel better. However, it is not useful in dealing with any other medical conditions. Some therapists claim to adjust or balance the body’s “energy,” but this is contrary to scientific knowledge. If you have any medical condition, it is best to consult with your physician before receiving massage.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/massage.html>

### ***Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine***

There is some evidence that acupuncture may be useful in dealing with some types of pain and nausea. However, it has not been shown to be useful for anything else. The “theory” of traditional Chinese medicine, which involves balancing the flow of the mystical *qi* “energy” and many other ideas from thousands of years ago, is contrary to scientific knowledge of how the body works, and cannot provide a rational basis for health care. Qi gong and tai chi may be useful forms of exercise and relaxation. Chinese herbal remedies, like other herbs, may have dangerous side effects, and there have been many problems of contamination with toxic chemicals and conventional drugs.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/acu.html>

## ***Magnet Therapy***

Various magnet products are sold for relief of pain. Unlike the very powerful magnets used in medicine, these are too weak to have any effects on the body. There is no good evidence that they are useful. Many people may feel they have been helped, but this is because of the placebo effect\*.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/QA/magnet.html>

## ***Chelation Therapy***

This therapy consists of treatment with a chemical (EDTA) to help remove calcium or other metals from the body. While there is a legitimate medical use in treatment of heavy metal poisoning, the most popular treatments (to treat heart disease and some other conditions) have not been shown to be useful. They also do not make sense in terms of scientific understanding of atherosclerosis.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/chelation.html>

## ***Homeopathy***

A therapy that claims that very small amounts of substances which cause symptoms *similar* to the disease can cause the body to heal itself. It also claims that the *more dilute* the remedy, the more powerful it is (some homeopathic remedies do not contain any molecules of the original substance!). These ideas are contrary to scientific knowledge. There is no good evidence that homeopathy is useful. Some people may feel they have been helped, but this is because of the placebo effect\*.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/homeo.html>

## ***Iridology, Applied Kinesiology, Live Cell Analysis***

These are three methods used by some alternative practitioners to diagnose disease. *Iridology* claims that the appearance of the iris of the eye is a guide to health conditions throughout the body. *Applied kinesiology* uses muscle testing (and trickery) to diagnose allergies or nutritional deficiencies and to prescribe remedies. *Live cell analysis* involves making diagnoses based on the appearance of blood cells. *None of these methods is scientifically valid.* They all violate knowledge of how the body works.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/iridology.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/Tests/ak.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/Tests/livecell.html>

## ***Therapeutic Touch***

A method, usually used by nurses, in which the hands are used to detect and correct blockages and imbalances in the human “energy field.” Often the body is not actually touched. Sometimes called *healing touch*. There is no evidence that such an “energy field exists,” and no evidence that the method provides any health benefits.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/tt.html>

## ***Naturopathy***

An approach to healing using “natural” methods. Naturopaths may use various alternative practices such as herbs, acupuncture, and homeopathy, along with dietary supplements and lifestyle recommendations. Because they often incorporate invalid (and sometimes dangerous) approaches, they cannot be recommended as health care providers.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/Naturopathy/naturopathy.html>

## ***Colonic Irrigation***

In this method, large amounts of water are used to wash out the large intestine, supposedly to remove “toxins.” This is based on false ideas concerning how the body works. Colonic irrigation is potentially dangerous and should be avoided.

For more information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/gastro.html>

\*The placebo effect: people often feel their condition is improved simply by knowing that they have been treated, even if the treatment does not actually do anything. That is one reason why controlled studies are needed to determine if treatments really work. (Another reason is that many conditions improve on their own, so that the patient may give the treatment credit even though it did nothing.)

**Recommendations of KCAHF are based on our assessments of the scientific literature concerning unconventional approaches to health care. For specific recommendations concerning your medical condition, consult your physician.**

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