

Complementary medicines

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Summary

1. PSA supports the use of complementary medicines in conditions where there is evidence of benefit or as an adjunctive therapy with conventional medicines.
2. PSA encourages consumers to talk to their pharmacist about the medicines they use, including complementary medicines. Pharmacists will work in partnership with the individual to provide evidence-based advice and ensure complementary medicine choices are informed, safe and appropriate.
3. PSA does not support the sale of homeopathy products in pharmacies due to the lack of reliable evidence of efficacy.

1. Informed consumer choice

PSA encourages the provision of evidence-based information on complementary medicines to the consumer so they may make an informed choice. The provision of this information is particularly important for patients who are delaying or rejecting conventional medicine in place of complementary medicine, for which there is limited evidence of efficacy and unknown or unestablished safety.

To ensure medicines, whether complementary or pharmaceutical, are safe and appropriate for any health condition, a pharmacist should be consulted to provide advice and guidance. Pharmacists, as medicines and medication management experts, have a fundamental role in ensuring consumers have access to safe and effective medicines. When discussing the use of complementary medicines with consumers, pharmacists must ensure they are able to make an informed decision by providing the best available information on current evidence (or lack thereof) for efficacy, as well as information on any potential side effects, drug interactions and risks of harm.¹ While complementary medicines may be safe for many people, there are still risks associated with their use. These risks are particularly important to be aware of when considering imported products which fall outside TGA regulatory control and may be of lower grade, carry risk of incorrect complementary medicine ingredients and could contain adulterants.

Discussing the use of complementary medicines with a pharmacist is particularly important when there is a choice to delay conventional medical treatment or reject it entirely. There is some evidence to suggest that the use of complementary medicines can be associated with a delay in conventional medical treatment and that it may be chosen as a treatment over conventional treatment methods by some people.² Further, that there is a 'two-fold greater risk of death' compared to people with no complementary medicine use.² This practice is widespread and has prompted health departments to issue warnings to people who are undergoing chemotherapy noting that avoiding conventional treatment methods in order to use complementary medicines alone might lead one to 'potentially sacrifice years' of life.³ Delaying conventional medical treatment in favour of using complementary medicines may be associated with poorer health outcomes and lead to significantly reduced lifespans.⁴

2. [Supporting evidence-based use](#)

PSA recognises that complementary medicines may have a role in the treatment or management of some health conditions and support their use when there is evidence of benefits, or when used as adjunct treatment to conventional medicine.

Complementary medicines and vitamin supplements are used by people around the world and have proved safe for many populations. There is some evidence to suggest the use of dietary supplements are unnecessary for the general population, that our diet should provide the vitamins and minerals we need, although there may be some populations which can benefit from dietary or vitamin supplements such as pregnant or lactating women and athletes in heavy training.⁵ However, dietary supplements and vitamins are viewed as separate to complementary medicines by many people, with people perceiving they obtain various benefits from the use of complementary medicines and use them both as a way to treat and prevent illness. There is some evidence to suggest that people with chronic or comorbid medical conditions are more likely to use complementary medicines than the general population.⁶ Although it should be noted that people with complex health conditions or taking many medications may be at increased risk of adverse events associated with complementary medicine use.⁶

Complementary medicines may have a role in the management or treatment of some conditions and may be used as an adjunctive therapy with conventional medicines, provided that there is evidence to support their use.

3. [Homeopathy products](#)

PSA does not support the sale of homeopathy products in pharmacies and endorses the NHMRC report which found there is a lack of evidence related to the efficacy of these products.

PSA endorses the NHMRC report, released in March 2015 which found that there are no health conditions for which there is reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective and that homeopathy should

not be used to treat health conditions that are chronic, serious, or could become serious.⁷⁻⁹ The NHMRC further mentions that consumers may put their health at risk if they reject or delay treatments for which there is good evidence for safety and effectiveness.⁸ PSA does not support the sale of homeopathy products in pharmacy. Pharmacists must use their professional judgement to prevent the supply of products with no reliable evidence or evidence of no effect. PSA notes that other health organisations have taken similar positions on the issue of homeopathy.¹⁰

The World Health Organization has raised safety concerns related to the preparation of homeopathy products, that the 'source materials' for preparing these products may contain pathogenic agents due to the inclusion of plant or animal material. This material itself may contain pathogenic agents, or the materials may undergo degradation processes or microbiological contamination during the manufacturing process.¹¹ These safety concerns suggest that not only is there limited evidence of efficacy of homeopathic products, there may also be a risk associated with their use, further confirming that they are not suitable products to be sold through a pharmacy.

4. Partnership approach in consumer decision-making

PSA is committed to supporting pharmacists to assist consumers, carers or guardians in making informed decisions regarding complementary medicines, and advocates for a partnership approach with the patient, carer or guardian to ensure Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) and respect for patient autonomy.

Many Australians use complementary medicines on a regular basis. It has been reported that 7 out of 10 people in Australia regularly use complementary medicines, with sales reaching around \$5.69 billion in 2021, which is almost double what was spent 10 years ago.¹² With this high rate of use amongst Australian consumers, it is important to ensure complementary medicines are safe and appropriate for the person considering using them. Vitamins, mineral supplements and herbal medicines are classified in Australia as 'listed medicines'. These medicines must only use low-risk, preapproved ingredients and not make claims or imply that they will be useful in the treatment of a serious illness or condition.¹³ PSA notes that while products sold in Australia are regulated through the TGA, products sold on international websites may not meet the standards of safety or quality enforced through the TGA – as such, by purchasing these products, consumers may be exposing themselves to risk. That is not to say products purchased in Australia are safe for everyone, there are many possible adverse effects related to complementary medicines. These effects may be experienced due to a dose that is too high, inappropriate complementary medicine used for a health condition which could exacerbate issues, or interactions between complementary medicines and pharmaceutical medicines.

When supplying complementary medicines to consumers, pharmacists should be guided by the PSA Code of Ethics, which states that the pharmacist must respect the autonomy and rights of the consumer, carer or guardian to actively participate in decision making, and must balance this with the health and wellbeing of the consumer – the pharmacist's first priority.¹⁴ In the event that a consumer chooses to use a product with limited evidence, the pharmacist must advise the consumer on the risks of rejecting

or delaying treatments for which there is good evidence for safety and effectiveness. PSA encourages pharmacists to consider the available evidence for the use of complementary medicines when deciding to stock them in their pharmacy.

5. Consumers should discuss their complementary medicine use with a pharmacist

PSA acknowledges the wide use of complementary medicines and strongly encourages consumers to discuss their complementary medicine use with a pharmacist for evidence-based advice.

PSA encourages all consumers to notify their pharmacist and general practitioner if they are taking complementary medicines, as there is potential for interactions between conventional or prescribed medicines and complementary medicines. In 2012, a survey conducted by the National Prescribing Service found that 48% of respondents did not tell their pharmacist or doctor about other medicines they were taking.¹⁵ This lack of disclosure, combined with the main sources of complementary medicine information reportedly being friends and family,¹⁶ or word of mouth,¹⁷ suggest there may be potential medicine safety risks associated with self-initiated complementary medicine use. Pharmacists consider the provision of information related to complementary medicine as part of their professional duty¹⁸ and can assist consumers in ensuring their complementary medicine choices are safe and appropriate.

To ensure best possible health outcomes, PSA strongly encourages all consumers considering taking complementary medicines to first consult their pharmacist for sound, evidence-based advice. Further, that due to the possible interactions between pharmaceutical medicines and complementary medicines, the consumer work with their health care professional to compile a consolidated list of complementary medicines to allow continued safe provision of all medicines.

Supporting evidence / reference

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