

by Ken Casanova

PWCs (people with CFIDS) should approach alternative and complementary medical treatments not only with an open mind but also with caution and with reason. Too many PWCs in their sometimes desperate efforts to find relief understandably try any treatment that sounds promising.

After trying a treatment in the hope it will work (sometimes for a very lengthy period) the PWC may finally realize that the treatment has not worked or not lived up to expectations. The PWC may then hear of another new treatment and will try again. Many PWCs have spent thousands of dollars on alternative treatments (not to mention traditional treatments) without success.

Many patients, however, do obtain some relief and even significant improvement from some alternative therapies. Before undertaking an alternative treatment, try to learn as much as possible about how and why it is supposed to work. What is the theory behind the treatment? Is there scientific or anecdotal research on the treatment's mode of action in the body, its chemistry, and the rates of success or failure? What are realistic expectations of the treatment's benefits? Do the claims of the practitioner sound realistic? Be especially skeptical of claims of outright cures. Moreover, read the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalopathy (CFS/CFIDS/ME) literature and talk to other knowledgeable CFS/CFIDS/ME patients as to whether a treatment seems to have value.

As isolated as we often are as CFS/CFIDS/ME patients, we should note we are not alone in turning to alternative medicine. According to a study by the Harvard Medical School and published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*:

An estimated four in ten Americans used at least one alternative or complementary remedy in 1997. Visits to alternative practitioners in 1997 jumped by 47% from 1991, exceeding all visits to primary care doctors (Source: *Boston Globe*, 11/11/98)

Alternative therapies may be helpful, but ultimately the wheat must be separated from the chaff by scientific research. If your own investigation suggests that a particular treatment has actually helped many PWCs and has been shown to be safe, then you may want to try it before hard data become available. Always try to research the safety of any particular treatment before embarking upon it. Sometimes a new treatment will burst upon the scene, many people will try it, and later it will turn out to be dangerous for some or many patients.

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE ANYWAY?

Medical Science is now beginning to recognize the value of certain alternative approaches. Acupuncture, for one, is known to help in certain conditions and illnesses. The National Institutes of Health has even established an Office of Alternative Medicine to research the effectiveness of non-traditional treatments. Increasingly, more doctors have apparently begun to recognize and validate the pivotal value of vitamins, minerals, and diet in illness prevention. Certain herbal treatments have long been widely prescribed by physicians in Europe. To name just one example, garlic has been shown scientifically to contain anti-viral agents; however, it also thins the blood, so it may cause excessive bleeding when combined with anti-coagulants. Herbs and other supplements are chemicals, so they may or may not be harmless, depending on the circumstances. So always try to determine all the facts (pros, cons, side effects, and possible drug interactions) before you consider a new regimen!

Finally, we should acknowledge that the holistic approach—the notion that the whole person must be treated in relationship to his or her environment and that one part of the body or mind should not be treated in isolation from the rest of the individual—generally represents a highly positive development in medicine. Just as with traditional medicine, PWCs need to be informed consumers of alternative medicine—separating treatments that can help from the merely trendy and those that are actually potentially harmful.