This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Naturopathy
Clinical Tool

This clinical tool will focus on naturopathic medicine and its use in Whole Health care. After providing some overall background, it will follow the ECHO mnemonic (Efficacy, Costs, Harms, Opinions—see the Deciding if an Approach Is Worth Using: The E.C.H.O. Mnemonic clinical tool) to offer information clinicians can use to:

- Inform conversations with patients about naturopathy
- Make informed referrals to practitioners who offer it, if so desired
- Experience naturopathic medicine themselves, if they wish

Naturopathy: A Background

The term naturopathy (from the roots for “nature” and “disease”) was coined in 1895 by John Scheel. The term was later purchased by Benedict Lust, who is known as the “Father of Naturopathy.” In 2006, there were 4,010 licensed Naturopathic Doctors (NDs) in the United States and Canada, and the number has been climbing rapidly.¹ There are also many other practitioners, often billed as “Naturopathic Consultants” or simply “naturopaths,” who are usually credentialed through less rigorous means.

Use Patterns

According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, for which a representative sample of 87,500 Americans were interviewed, 0.3% of those surveyed had sought care from a naturopathic practitioner.² This equates to an estimated 729,000 adults and is a slight increase from 0.2% in 2002. The VA Healthcare Analysis and Information Group (HAIG) survey of 2011 found that no VA facilities currently offer naturopathy.³ Nevertheless, naturopathy is increasingly popular, and it is important for clinicians to be able to discuss this healing system with patients.

Licensure and Education

ND licensing is determined at the state level. There are 17 states that require naturopathic physicians to be licensed to practice. Licensure can occur after a person does four years of graduate training at an accredited naturopathic medical school. There are five such schools in the United States. ND candidates are also required to successfully pass a licensing examination, much as MDs and DOs (doctors of osteopathic medicine) must do.
In some states and U.S. territories, NDs are regarded as fully qualified primary care practitioners who must be covered by insurance. Licensure occurs in the following places:

- Alaska
- Arizona
- California
- Connecticut
- District of Columbia
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Kansas
- Maine
- Minnesota
- Montana
- New Hampshire
- Oregon
- Utah
- Vermont
- Washington
- Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

Unfortunately, in nonlicensure states, many people who bill themselves as naturopaths may have limited training from online courses. In contrast, most licensed naturopathic physicians (NDs) are trained in primary care. They can write prescriptions and order diagnostic testing. They may specialize in a number of different areas, including the various areas of complementary medicine listed below.

**Philosophy and Principles**

Naturopathy is often classed as system of medicine, rather than a specific therapy. It might best be viewed as an *overall philosophy of care*—an approach that incorporates many different therapies based on how well they resonate with naturopathy’s seven key principles. These principles include:

1. Respect the *healing power of nature* (*vis medicatrix naturae*). The body’s power to heal itself is key. The clinician’s role is to support and enhance that process.
2. *First, do no harm.* Naturopathy begins with the simplest and least invasive approaches and scales up only as necessary.
3. *Find the cause* (do not just treat the symptoms). Naturopathic physicians seek out the underlying cause of a disease; simply suppressing symptoms is strongly discouraged.
4. *Treat the whole person.* Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social factors are all taken into account.
5. *Focus on prevention.* This is highly valued. Patient education and lifestyle choice counseling are considered fundamental.
6. Keep the *focus on optimal health and balance.* (This goes beyond prevention.) This can mean focusing on reaching greater wellness, regardless of the severity of a disease or one’s risk of death.
7. *The clinician is a teacher.* The word “doctor” is tied to the word *docere,* which means teacher. The clinician engages the patient as a respected member of his or her team.
These principles tie in nicely the concepts of personalized, proactive, patient-driven care and the Whole Health approach.

Naturopathy follows a **therapeutic order** as well. This is derived from the writing of Hippocrates. Practitioners ramp up from the least potentially harmful therapies to the most potentially harmful according to a hierarchy.

### The Therapeutic Order of Naturopathy

1. Establish the conditions—or basis—for health. Identify disturbing factors and institute a more healthful regimen.
2. Stimulate the body's natural power to heal itself.
3. Address weakened or damaged organs or body systems. Approaches might include supporting and strengthening the immune system, reducing inflammation, reducing toxicity, and/or balancing hormonal and regulatory systems.
4. Correct structural integrity. This is where physical medicine in its various forms plays a role.
5. Address pathology in natural ways, such as nutritional therapies, nutrients, homeopathic remedies, hydrotherapy, and counseling.
6. Use pharmaceuticals.
7. Bring radiation, chemotherapy, or surgery into the mix only if all these other methods are failing to have an effect.

Naturopathy **encompasses many modalities**. ND students have the option to focus on certain areas as they move through their training. These include:

- **Diet and clinical nutrition.**
- **Behavioral change**, including working with mindful awareness techniques. See the [Mindful Awareness](#) and [Power of the Mind](#) modules for more information.
- **Hydrotherapy**, the internal and/or external use of water in various forms (ice, liquid water, or steam).
- **Homeopathy**. See the [Homeopathy](#) clinical tool for more information.
- **Botanical medicine.** Dietary supplements are also used. For more details, see the [Dietary Supplements: An Overview](#) module. One approach some naturopaths prefer is gemmotherapy, which is the therapeutic use of budding plant parts. Practitioners believe these remedies are more potent energetically and chemically than remedies taken from the full-grown plant.
- **Detoxification.** To learn more about various “detox” methods, see the [Chelation, Cleanses, Saunas, and Supplements: What Every Clinician Should Know about Popular Approaches to “Detox”](#) clinical tool.
- **Naturopathic physical medicine**, the therapeutic use of exercise, physiotherapy, energy work, manipulation, and other approaches.
- **Acupuncture**. See the [Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine](#) clinical tool.
Efficacy

Most research on complementary approaches focuses on separate interventions, such as how well “dietary supplement A” works for treating “condition B.” It is more difficult to study a system like naturopathy, which uses combinations of therapeutic approaches. Some of these approaches may synergize with each other. Since NDs tailor their health plans (sound familiar?) to the individual and his or her needs, it is difficult to keep the intervention consistent for a study format. Historically, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has supported some naturopathic research. Current studies are focused on type 2 diabetes, gum disease, and breast cancer prevention.

Here are some recent study findings of note related to general naturopathic care:

- A 2009 study of 75 people with anxiety were followed for 8 or more weeks as they received either naturopathic care or psychotherapy. The naturopathic care varied from person to person. Both groups had equivalent, and statistically significant, improvements on the Beck Anxiety Inventory. The average inventory scores decreased by 30.5% in the naturopathy group.
- A 2013 Canadian study evaluated 246 postal workers with increased cardiovascular disease risk who received either “enhanced usual care” (usual care with biometric measurement) or enhanced usual care plus naturopathic care. Again, care by the ND was individualized. After a year, the naturopathic group had markedly reduced their 10-year cardiovascular risk relative to the other group. The risk reduction was -16.9% (95%, CI of -29.55 to -4.25%).
- Another study of 77 Canadian postal workers found that naturopathy was superior to physical exercise over 12 weeks for the treatment of rotator cuff tendonitis.

Ultimately, understanding the efficacy of naturopathy requires a familiarity with the efficacy of the various complementary approaches encompassed by it. For instance, hydrotherapy, one of several tools in the naturopathic toolbox, has favorable immunomodulatory effects, and rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, wound healing, hemorrhoids, heart failure, and varicose veins seem to improve with its use (according to multiple studies); however, all of these studies have been criticized for having methodological problems. According to a 2014 review, overall effects of hydrotherapy are minimal. Other approaches, such as the use of specific herbal remedies, may have much more evidence-based support.

Costs

Costs vary for a session with a naturopathic physician (licensed) or traditional naturopath (not licensed). Depending on state licensure requirements and insurance coverage, visits
may have to be paid for out of pocket. Many NDs will charge between $100 and $400 for a consultation lasting an hour or more. These costs are not likely to be covered by the VA. Many naturopaths sell the supplements they recommend out of their practice location, which may raise ethical concerns. Some practitioners also charge patients to provide “outside” laboratory testing (testing provided through a private company), which includes many lab tests not available in the conventional medical system.

Harms

Reports of adverse effects of naturopathy are rare, but safety is contingent to some degree on the skill and knowledge of a given practitioner. Patients should be clear about what the practitioners’ qualifications are before they go for a visit. In general, the methods used preferentially by naturopaths are much less invasive or harmful than many conventional medicine interventions.

However, natural remedies are not without their potential for causing harm. For more information, see the Dietary Supplements: An Overview module.

Opinions

Patients often feel quite positive about their interactions with naturopaths, and they may become quite attached to the therapies recommended for them. It is important to be clear on timeframes for how long a patient will be using any given therapy, as well as how the patient will determine that the therapy has been effective. It is important to ensure, in more acute or urgent cases, that patients do not delay receiving conventional treatments that have better research supporting their use, if appropriate. Otherwise, disease progression can occur and, down the line, conventional therapeutic options could become less effective.

Integrative medicine and naturopathic medicine share some similarities, but integrative medicine makes use of a broader array of complementary approaches. NDs tend to have much more intensive training in the use of remedies that might be classed as “natural.” In many ways the two overlap, and both overlap to a significant degree with the Whole Health approach as well. When all is said and done, all three are geared toward personalizing care, focusing on prevention and self-care, and drawing from the power of nature—both internal and external to the body—to enhance healing.
Tips about Naturopathic Medicine from an Integrative Medicine Clinician

I have several patients who see a naturopathic physician. I favor having them see NDs who have the four years of additional training and have to take licensing examinations. Be sure to know about a practitioner's qualifications, especially if you are in a state where they are not licensed.

I often find that naturopaths can lend a unique perspective, which is often helpful. However, I am resistant to sending people to see a practitioner who charges a lot extra for supplements or less-conventional laboratory testing offered by private corporations.

I find that NDs have a nice array of options they can offer people who are unwilling to take medications. I only refer to people who are willing to be in regular contact with the rest of the care team about my patients’ progress. There are times where I find myself arguing with a naturopath about the science they use to justify a particular therapy.

Additional Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.naturopathic.org/">http://www.naturopathic.org/</a></td>
<td>The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians is the main organization for licensed NDs. This site can help with finding naturopaths in your area. You can also obtain more information from your state naturopathic association.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

This clinical tool was written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, Associate Professor and Director of the Academic Integrative Medicine Fellowship Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, and Assistant Director and faculty for the VHA Whole Health: Change the Conversation clinical program.

References