Complementary, alternative and integrative therapies during cancer treatment – nutrition related supplements: a clinician guide

Some people with cancer may try complementary or alternative therapies in an effort to treat their cancer, assist with the side effects of treatment, or help them to cope generally.

For a person considering taking dietary or herbal supplements, it is important they are well informed about the pros and cons of any supplements and have discussed this with their medical team.

Patients often do not disclose their use of complementary or alternative therapies to health professionals and it has therefore been recommended that clinicians initiate discussion in a non-judgemental manner using high level communication skills.

All members of the team should be well versed with common therapies, assisting patients with decision-making, and directing them to evidence-based information or other clinicians as required.

A collaborative effort by the entire multidisciplinary team is needed for interpreting the literature, identifying potential interactions and making recommendations for practice. It is important to be specific when reviewing the research with an individual and to consider all factors relating to supplement type, tumour stream and treatment plan in individual decision-making.

There is an ethical obligation to ensure patients are well informed, particularly where there is strong evidence of supplements with potential negative/harmful effects. As long as there is no harm or interaction with conventional treatments, most clinicians accept patients trying complementary therapies and acknowledge these can be beneficial for the mind and soul.

What does the research say?
At present, there is limited research with conclusive evidence on many supplements. It is important to remain open-minded, however, as new information becomes available.

Full list of references available from:
Where can I get further information?
The following websites/resources are useful to check the latest research or interactions with medications:

- Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20 and iHeard website (https://iheard.com.au/)
- Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database (www.naturaldatabase.com)
- PEN Nutrition (http://www.pennutrition.com)
- Up-To-Date (http://www.uptodate.com/patients/index.html)

To whom should I direct my patient for further information?
Team members should refer patients to qualified complementary and integrative therapies practitioners where possible. Practitioners should have completed the relevant education and be a member of a professional association, for example National Herbalists Association of Australia, Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association, Chinese Medicine Registration Board. In addition, some practitioners have completed degrees or post doctoral study and it would be ideal for clinicians to find out if any such practitioners exist in their area.

Clinicians should ideally meet a few complementary and integrative therapies practitioners in their local area to find out about their background, experience and training and then build a referral list to provide diversity. In addition, a referral letter including medical history and treatment plan, medications, and dietary recommendations should be included to increase patient safety – please liaise within the primary oncology team regarding who will complete this.