

# HEALTH & FITNESS

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## Alternative remedies



Christine Kinsella, a licensed acupuncturist and Chinese herbalist, treats patient Cynde Durnford-Branecki during an acupuncture session in San Diego. Ten years and \$2.5 billion in research have found no cures from alternative medicine. Yet these mostly unproven treatments are now mainstream and used by more than a third of all Americans.

Associated Press

## More insurers now paying for unproven therapies embraced by more than one-third of Americans

By Marilyn Marchione  
Associated Press

*Editor's note: Ten years and \$2.5 billion in research have found no cures from alternative medicine. Yet these mostly unproven treatments are now mainstream and used by more than a third of all Americans. This is one in an occasional Associated Press series on their use and potential risks.*

Acupuncture, not pain pills that "make me loopy," is what Cynde Durnford-Branecki wants for her aching back, and a treatment costs her only a \$20 copayment.

"If I didn't have insurance, there's no way I could afford to go," said the 51-year-old graphic designer who lives in San Diego.

After years of being lobbied for more choice, insurers and employers increasingly are covering alternative therapies. There are even alternative "HMOs" — networks of nontraditional providers that sell services to big employers and individuals.

It is one of the last frontiers for moving alternative medicine into the mainstream, fans say. Some are pushing to require or expand coverage as part of health care reform.

Choice may sound like a good idea, but it can lead more people to use remedies they may not realize are of unproven value. It also can mean the people who use those treatments will wind up paying for them, rather than have their insurer pay for proven remedies. Here's how:

- Insurers only cover a narrow range of alternative services for specific conditions where there is evidence of value, such as chiropractors for some types of back pain. But these services are marketed for many other uses that lack such proof, such as chiropractic treatments for asthma or ear infections, and acupuncture for high blood pressure or insomnia. Patients can be stuck with the tab, even though the provider is in their insurer's network.

- Most insurers do not pay for herbals and dietary supplements because they are of unproven safety and worth. Yet some insurers, such as Aetna, let sellers advertise supplements to members, which can imply a benefit and coverage. Kaiser Permanente's HMO carries many supplements in its pharmacies and allows its network doctors to "prescribe" ones that it then sells to members, who pay the full cost.

The result: Consumers who choose alternatives can wind up paying a greater share of their health care. Every person who chooses St. John's wort instead of Prozac for depression, red yeast rice instead of Lipitor for lowering cholesterol, or an unproven therapy instead of a visit to a medical doctor, pays out of pocket and saves the insurer money.

Insurers insist that saving money is not their motivation for offering or promoting alternative remedies.

"In no way would it benefit Aetna to have our members using harmful things," said Aetna spokeswoman Wendy Morphew.

Instead, these companies say they are offering the choice that consumers have long demanded, and a safer way to get supplements that people already are buying from sources of dubious quality.

"We're not suggesting you buy this. But if you buy this, here is a place to get it safely," said R. Douglas Metz, a chiropractor who is chief health services officer of American Specialty Health Inc., of San Diego.

It is the largest of about half a dozen firms that provide complementary and alternative medicine services to insurers, employers and individuals.

Like an HMO, it has 15,000 chiropractors, 6,000 acupuncturists, 6,000 massage therapists and others in its network.

About 13 million Americans are covered or eligible to use its services, including Durnford-Branecki, who works for the firm.

Aetna became one of its customers two years ago. A recent Aetna newsletter told members they could get at least a 15 percent discount and free shipping on more than 2,400 health and wellness products offered through American Specialty, including vitamin and herbal supplements, aromatherapy products and homeopathic remedies.

"They offered a great program," credentialing providers in their network and finding good supplement suppliers, said Robin Downey, head of product development for Aetna.

"We have members who come to us and ask us for these services. When we can get a discount for them, that's something we are able to pass on," although Aetna also recommends that members talk with their primary doctors about anything they plan to try, she said.

The discount program is "an offering," not a recommendation to use a product, said Dr. Robert McDonough, who develops clinical policies for Aetna.

Metz, of American Specialty Health, said: "We only sell products for which there is no known evidence of risk. Our rule is, if a healthy person can safely take the product we will sell it."

However, he sees great danger in people diagnosing and treating their own ailments, a mindset he described as "I've got a headache and I'm going to go on the Internet and see if there's a dietary supplement that can help me."

Metz also does not use any of these remedies himself.

"The sense that dietary supplements are safe because they're natural is not something that I believe," he said.

On the Net:

- Alternative medicine "HMO": <http://www.ashcompanies.com>
- Kaiser stance: <http://xnet.kp.org/permanentejournal/sum08/herbs.html>



## Medication disposal a concern to local group

Recent news has reported the discovery of small amounts of medications in drinking water, according to the Portage County Safe Medication Disposal Committee.

Although these amounts are very small and are likely to have little or no effect on humans, proper disposal of medications is important to help protect wildlife and keep lakes, rivers and streams clean.

Also, proper disposal of medications will help ensure that nobody else gets hold of a medication that may harm them.

Despite common belief, most medications should NOT be flushed down the toilet and should NOT be poured down a sink or drain.

If you have leftover medications that were prescribed to you or that you purchased from a drug store without a prescription, a few simple steps can be taken to properly dispose of them:

1. Pour the medication into a plastic bag that can be sealed. If the medicine is in a solid form, such as a pill or capsule, add water to the bag to dissolve the medication or crush it.
2. Add a substance such as kitty litter, coffee grounds or sawdust to the plastic bag. This will make the destroyed medication less attractive for others (such as pets or children) to get into.
3. Seal the bag and place it in the trash.
4. Remove all information from the medications that would identify you, such as the prescription label.

If you have any questions, speak with your pharmacist or visit the SMARxT Disposal Web site at [www.smarxtdisposal.net](http://www.smarxtdisposal.net).

The Portage County Safe Medication Disposal Committee includes Family & Community Services Inc., Medication Access Program, RSVP, NEUCOM/NEUCOP, Portage County Sheriff's Department, Portage County Health Department, Portage County Prosecutor's Office, Home Instead Senior Care, Area Agency on Aging 10B, Robinson Memorial Hospital and the Ohio EPA.

## Grant supports new breastfeeding group

Women who want to nurse their babies have a new resource available at Robinson Memorial Hospital in Ravenna. The Dr. Mary Marsick Pediatric Education Endowment Fund has awarded a grant to a new breastfeeding support group at the hospital that will provide resources and information to local women.

"This support group will meet women's various educational needs, improve patient care beyond the inpatient experience and provide reference books and materials to group participants," said Brea Loewitt of The Birth Center at Robinson. "Supporting breastfeeding will improve the overall health of women and children in the community."

Breastfeeding is believed to decrease a baby's risk of allergies, obesity and diabetes. In addition, most breastfed babies achieve healthy weight gain, experience fewer ear infections and have less illness in the first year of life.

Breastfeeding can also decrease the risks of many types of cancers in mothers, including breast and ovarian cancer. Breastfeeding mothers are also less likely to experience postpartum depression and less likely to abandon, abuse or shake their infants.

For more information or to sign up for the support group, call (330) 297-2576.

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