

**Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities**



**American Cancer Society Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>**  
*Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*

**Wellness along the Cancer Journey:  
American Indian, Alaska Native, and  
Complementary Healing**



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**WELLNESS ALONG THE CANCER JOURNEY: AMERICAN INDIAN, ALASKA NATIVE, AND COMPLEMENTARY HEALING**

**Goals:** This supplemental module describes the importance of American Indian, Alaska Native, and complementary healing practices. It covers the following:

- What is the history of American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices?
- What are the differences between complementary and alternative healing practices?
- What are some questions to ask about complementary or alternative methods?



*Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*

**American Indian, Alaska Native, and Complementary Healing**

**Module Overview .....5**  
**American Indian and Alaska Native Healing .....7**  
    The History of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing..... 8  
    Studies of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing ..... 8  
    Key Messages ..... 9  
**Complementary or Alternative Healing.....12**  
    Using Complementary or Alternative Treatments..... 13  
    Key Messages ..... 17

**Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities**



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**Chapter 1: Module Overview**



## ***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

### **Module Overview**

American Indian and Alaska Native healing includes the wide spectrum of healing beliefs and practices found among hundreds of tribes of North America. It combines religion and spirit with herbs and rituals. This approach is used to treat people with medical, emotional, and spiritual problems.

From the Native point of view, medicine is more about healing the person than curing a disease. Healers aim to “make whole” by bringing harmony to a person’s life. This includes harmony with the community and the spirit of nature, which is sometimes called God or the Creator. Healing is based on the belief that every person and thing on earth is connected. Each person, animal, and plant has a spirit or essence. Even an object, such as a river or rock, and even the earth itself, may be thought to have this kind of spirit.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have a tradition that believes illness and disease stem from a person not being balanced (spiritually, mentally, and physically). Such a person may have unhealthy habits or unhealthy thoughts. American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices aim to find and restore balance and wholeness in a person. They seek to bring a person back to a healthy and spiritually pure state.

There are many types of American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices that are promoted to help with a number of illnesses. American Indian and Alaska Native healing include the use of herbal remedies, as well as rituals, ceremonies, and symbolic therapies. Medicine men and women may use these ways to treat illnesses of both the body and spirit.

Purifying rituals are often used to cleanse the body and prepare the person for healing. An American Indian or Alaska Native healer may focus on using spiritual powers to treat people. Symbolic healing rituals, which can involve family and friends of the sick person, are used to invoke the spirits to help heal the sick person.

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**Chapter 2: American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**



***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

## **American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

American Indian and Alaska Native healers may include herbalists, spiritual healers, and medicine men or medicine women. Many American Indians and Alaska Natives see their healers for spiritual reasons, such as to seek guidance, truth, balance, reassurance, and spiritual well-being. They may still use mainstream medicine to deal with “white man’s illness.” However, there is a belief that the spirit cannot be separated from healing.

There are more than 500 Native American tribal communities, with many differences between them. It is not surprising that healing rituals and beliefs vary a great deal. The most sacred traditions are still secret, passed along from one healer to the next. Because of these factors, information on healing practices is general and somewhat limited.

Because of some Native American tribes’ extensive knowledge of herbs, they are one of the best known forms of Native American healing. Herbal treatments can include teas, tinctures, and salves. One well known remedy for pain uses bark from a willow tree, which contains acetylsalicylic acid – now known as aspirin.

Purifying and cleansing the body is also an important practice used in some Native American healing rituals. Sweat lodges are special, darkened enclosures heated with stones from a fire. Special teas that induce vomiting may also be used by the healer for this purpose. Smudging is a practice that involves cleansing a place or person with the smoke of sacred plants. These methods can be used to bring about an altered mental state and greater awareness. They are done to help make a person more open to the healing techniques.

Another practice of Native American healing, symbolic healing rituals, can involve whole communities. These ceremonies can include chanting, singing, painting bodies, dancing, exorcisms, sand paintings, and even limited use of mind-altering substances. All this is done to promote healing of the sick. Such rituals can last for hours, days, or even weeks. These ceremonies are a way to ask for help from the spiritual dimension.

Prayer is also an essential part of Native American healing practices.

## ***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

### **The History of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

American Indian and Alaska Native healing methods have been used in North America for up to 40,000 years. These methods seem to have roots in common with other cultures, such as ancient Ayurvedic and Chinese traditions. They have also been influenced by the nature, plants, and animals where the Natives settled. Healing practices have evolved over time as the tribes moved and met with other tribes along trade routes. The tribes gathered many herbs from nearby lands, and sometimes traded them over long distances.

Many Native medicine practices were banned or illegal in parts of the United States for many decades. They were lost or driven underground until 1978, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed. Now, there still are problems with ceremonies and rituals on some of the sacred sites. They are sometimes forbidden because the land is now used for something else. Despite this, American Indian and Alaska Native people still practice traditional healing.

### **Studies of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

Some people believe American Indian and Alaska Native medicine can help cure diseases, injuries, and mental health problems.

One clinical trial looked at 116 people with a number of ailments who were treated with traditional Native healing. They had problems such as infertility, chest and back pain, asthma, depression, diabetes, and cancer. After a seven- to 28-day intensive healing experience, more than 80% reported some benefit. Five years later, 50 of these people said they were cured of their diseases, while another 41 said they felt better. Another nine reported no change, five were worse, and two had died. This group was compared to people who were seen in an emergency room. The comparison group got mainstream treatments, but they also reported benefit. None of either group's reports were verified by health care providers, and outcomes were not compared to those expected for each illness. Because of these and other limitations of the study, one cannot draw conclusions about how well American Indian and Alaska Native ways work for physical healing. But as of 2015, this is the only published research study available that compares traditional Indian healing with mainstream Western medicine.

American Indian and Alaska Native healing have not been proven to cure diseases, but also have not been well studied. Still, people often report that they



## ***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

have less pain and stress and better quality of life. The communal and spiritual support this type of healing provides could have helpful effects. Prayer, meditation, and looking inward can be calming and can help to reduce stress.

Because American Indian and Alaska Native healing is based a lot on spirituality, it can be hard to study. And, it's not easy to find groups large enough to study because healing practices are not the same for all the different Nations, healers, and illnesses. Also, many American Indians and Alaska Natives do not want their practices studied. They believe sharing such information exploits their culture and weakens their power to heal. In the past, outside people have sometimes misinterpreted Native culture and beliefs. This may increase their concerns about letting others study the ways they practice healing.

The herbs used in healing often have not been tested to find out how they interact with other medicines, foods, or dietary supplements. A few reports of harmful effects from herbs, or herbs that change the effects of other drugs may be published. But full studies of interactions and effects of any one herb are rarely available. Any list of the ill effects and interactions of herbs should be considered incomplete.

Many American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices may be used to help relieve some cancer symptoms and side effects of cancer treatment. But, as most American Indian/Alaska Native healers already know, they should not be expected to cure the cancer.

People being treated for cancer and other serious health problems should talk to their health care providers if they plan on using herbs or certain rituals. Cleansing rituals may be especially harmful to people who are already dehydrated or weak.

### **Key Messages**

- American Indian and Alaska Native healing traditions have been in practice for up to 40,000 years in North America.
- It is important to let your health care provider know before starting traditional herbs or healing practices if a person is getting cancer treatment.
- American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices seek to restore balance and to restore a person to a healthy and spiritually whole state.

***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

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**Chapter 3: Complementary and Alternative Medicine**



## ***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

### **Complementary and Alternative Medicine**

The discussion below is not about American Indian or Alaska Native healing methods, nor is it about mainstream Western medical treatments. It is about methods that are available in non-tribal, non-medical, or commercial settings.

“Complementary” and “alternative” are terms used to describe a number of products, practices, and systems. These methods are often not part of mainstream medicine in the United States. They can include things like herbs and dietary supplements, body movement, spiritual approaches, pills, extracts, and creams or ointments. A person can get most of these without a prescription. Often they are chosen and carried out by the person who uses them, or “self-prescribed.” Some are offered by a person with formal education and training, such as art therapy. Others may be suggested by the person who is selling the product in a store or on the Internet, such as herbs or supplements.

The American Cancer Society believes that complementary and alternative medicine are different from each other:

**Alternative medicine** is used *instead of* standard or mainstream medical treatment, often with serious outcomes for the person being treated.

**Complementary medicine** is used *along with* mainstream medical care. If carefully chosen and properly used, some of these can improve a person’s quality of life.

Complementary and alternative methods can involve everything from enemas, like colon therapy, to those that focus on the invisible, like energy work. Some take a lot of time or cost a lot of money, such as strict diets or travel to another country for special treatments. Others are fairly cheap and easy to use, like vitamins or homeopathy. Some can be done at home by the person, such as meditation and prayer. Others require another person to give them, like massage or acupuncture. Some almost never cause harm, while others can be dangerous and have caused deaths.

A person may hear about one or more of these treatments from friends, family, co-workers, salespeople, and others. The treatment may be something the person has never heard of before. One problem with this is that it can be hard to get good, unbiased information about some of these methods.

## ***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

Mainstream cancer treatments such as radiation, chemotherapy, and surgery can be unpleasant. But they have been scientifically tested and proven to work for treating cancer. The good and bad things about the treatment have been studied in clinical trials. Even though the side effects of mainstream cancer treatment can be serious, many can be controlled. These treatments can help a person fight a life-threatening disease.

People being treated for cancer who choose alternative medicine and don't use mainstream cancer treatments may be putting themselves at risk. They are giving up the only proven methods of treating their disease. Delays and gaps in standard treatment can pose a danger to someone being treated for cancer. They can give the cancer more time to grow and make it harder to treat. But even after cancer has reached a stage where cure is not possible, mainstream care can offer a lot in the way of cancer control and comfort.

### **Using Complementary or Alternative Treatments**

Some people think that mainstream medicine is the only choice they have for treating symptoms like pain and side effects, and boosting quality of life. But there are many complementary methods a person can use safely, right along with their cancer treatment. Some people find that certain methods can help control some of their symptoms and improve their quality of life. For instance, some use things like aromatherapy, biofeedback, massage, meditation, tai chi, or yoga. Of course, these methods do not treat the cancer.

Some cancer treatment centers offer some of these complementary treatments on-site. When they are offered along with mainstream care, it is called *integrative* therapy. That means a person get can get safe complementary treatments at their cancer treatment center without having to go out and find them on their own.

People being treated for cancer might think about using alternative and complementary methods for a number of reasons:

- To relieve the side effects of mainstream cancer treatment without having to take more medicine
- To try and find a treatment approach that might have few side effects
- To take an active role to improve their own health and wellness

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- Because they believe in a different system of treatment

Many people being treated for cancer don't want to discuss complementary or alternative methods with their health care provider. It's true that many health care providers may not know about the uses, risks, and potential benefits of these treatments. This lack of knowledge can widen the gap between someone being treated for cancer and a health care provider. It can make it harder to discuss using complementary methods along with regular cancer treatment. But this doesn't have to stop them.

A person can help bridge the gap in a number of ways. They can:

- Gather as much information as possible. Look for information from respected sources about the potential benefits and risks of the treatment they are thinking about.
- Share this information with their health care provider in a way that shows they know that the provider wants what is best for them. The person should let them know that they are thinking about different types of treatment and that they want to make sure it will not interfere with their regular medical treatment.
- Ask the health care provider if there are any studies on the method they are looking at. They might also ask about other options if that method does not work for them.
- Make a list of questions and bring it along with any other information they want to talk about. They can ask their health care provider to be a supportive partner as they learn more about other options and their treatment process.
- Bring a friend or family member with them to the health care provider's office for support. A loved one can help them talk with their health care provider. They can also relieve some of the stress of having to make decisions alone.
- Listen to what the health care provider has to say, and try to understand their point of view. If a person is thinking about a method that might cause problems with their medical treatment, they can discuss safer choices together.

***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

- Never delay or skip regular treatment. If a person is thinking about stopping or not taking mainstream treatment, it is important to talk to a health care provider about this. A person may be giving up the only proven treatment for their cancer.
- Be sure to ask a health care provider if there are mainstream methods for treating the side effects or symptoms they are having. There are many treatments like this that can make a person feel better.
- Make a complete list of everything they are taking and the amount of each. Many supplements can interact in harmful ways with other medicines. Talk with a health care provider and pharmacist about all the supplements and medicines being taken. Report any changes in supplement use to the health care team.
- If pregnant or breast-feeding, a woman should ask about the risks and effects of complementary or alternative methods.
- Never give herbal medicines to children without talking to their health care provider first.
- Ask a health care provider to help spot possible fraud and fraudulent products.

Here are some good questions to ask about alternative or complementary treatments:

- What claims are made for the treatment? Is it supposed to help medical treatment work better or relieve symptoms or side effects? Does it claim to cure cancer?
- What are the credentials of those who support the treatment? Are they experts in cancer and complementary medicine? What is the training and education of the complementary/alternative practitioner?
- Have careful scientific studies or clinical trials (tests in human volunteers) been done to find out whether this treatment works?
- Have the findings from the studies been published in trustworthy journals after being reviewed by other scientists in the same field?
- How is information about the method given? Is it promoted in the mass media, such as books, magazines, the Internet, TV, infomercials, and radio talk shows rather than in science journals?

***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

- How much does the treatment cost? Will health insurance cover it?
- Is the method widely available for use within the health care community?
- What is known about the safety of the treatment? Could it be harmful or interact badly with other medicines or supplements?
- Does the method require a person to give up regular medical treatment? If so, will doing so affect chances for a cure? Is the cancer likely to become more advanced during the delay?

The choice to use complementary or alternative methods is a personal one. They can be used more safely by following these guidelines:

- Learn about the risks and benefits of each therapy from reliable scientific sources.
- Talk with a health care provider about plans. Ask about risks and benefits, and find out about possible interactions with mainstream treatments.
- Ask a health care provider or cancer care team to refer someone who is reliable and trusted when looking for a practitioner to do non-mainstream treatment (such as for massage therapy).
- Talk with a health care provider before using a self-prescribed method instead of the medicine they prescribed.
- Make sure not to give up proven treatments for an unproven approach – or worse, for one that has already been proven not to work.
- Watch out for signs of fraud or misleading claims.
- Keep in mind that most complementary and alternative methods have not been tested for safety in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding – effects on a fetus or nursing child are mostly unknown.
- Talk with a child’s health care provider before giving treatments, supplements, or herbs to them.

To learn more about any treatment, a person can call a trusted health care provider. Or they call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.



***Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities***

**Key Messages**

- It is thought that many American Indian and Alaska Native healing traditions have been in practice for up to 40,000 years in North America, and they are still evolving.
- A person getting cancer treatment should check with a health care provider before starting any type of traditional herbs or other healing practices.
- American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices seek to restore balance and to restore a person to a healthy and spiritually whole state.
- There are a lot of unproven methods that are not part of American Indian traditions. Some of them claim to be able to treat serious illnesses, including cancer. Check with your health care provider before considering these types of methods.