

**T**O UNDERSTAND WHY the world of alternative medicine is so vexing, consider two of its most well-known examples: homeopathy and yoga.

Homeopathy is based on the idea that whatever causes an ailment will also cure it—using products diluted to the point where the key ingredient is undetectable. In spite of numerous studies showing that

homeopathy doesn't work and you may as well just drink a glass of water, the practice persists. In 2017 consumers in the U.S. spent more than \$1.3 billion on homeopathic remedies, according to the Nutrition Business Journal (NBJ).

Yoga, on the other hand, which has its roots in ancient Indian spiritual practices, has been adopted by millions to help with crippling medical problems. And unlike homeopathy, there's good evidence that it works. Last year, for example, a comprehensive review found that regular yoga practice helps to relieve back pain, one of Americans' most common and hard-to-treat health complaints.

A third of Americans say they have used alternative treatments in the past year—and more than half of these people say they prefer such approaches over mainstream medicine, according to a new nationally representative Consumer Reports survey of 1,003 adults. But in the crowded landscape of alternative treatments, it's almost impossible to determine which are worth trying.

Americans spent \$42 billion in 2017 on dietary supplements, according to an analysis from the NBJ. And the most recent figures available pegged spending at nearly \$15 billion for appointments with practitioners such as chiropractors, acupuncturists, and massage therapists.

It's not surprising: Conventional treatments, such as prescription drugs and invasive surgeries, can't always solve a wide array of common health problems. That's frustrating not just to patients but also to physicians. In fact, according to CR's recent survey, 29 percent of Americans who used alternative medicine or treatments in the past year did so because their doctors recommended it.

Often these approaches are used not instead of conventional regimens but with them, giving rise to the term "complementary medicine," or "integrative medicine." Some medical schools now teach integrative medicine, and Veterans Affairs doctors have also adopted it, prescribing acupuncture, yoga, or tai chi, for example, to treat pain.

But even physicians who embrace alternative medicine urge caution. "In theory, I love the idea of using a natural, less medicalized approach to illness, especially since there is so much medication overuse in our country," says Michael Hochman, M.D., director of the Gehr Family Center for Health Systems Science at the Keck School of

Medicine at the University of Southern California. "But when it comes to those therapies where the evidence isn't so rigorous, it can be damaging to your pocketbook and your health if you forgo more evidence-based treatment."

Case in point: Cancer patients who opted for complementary therapies and refused treatments such as chemotherapy were twice as likely to die as those who used conventional methods, according to a July 2018 study in the journal *JAMA Oncology*.

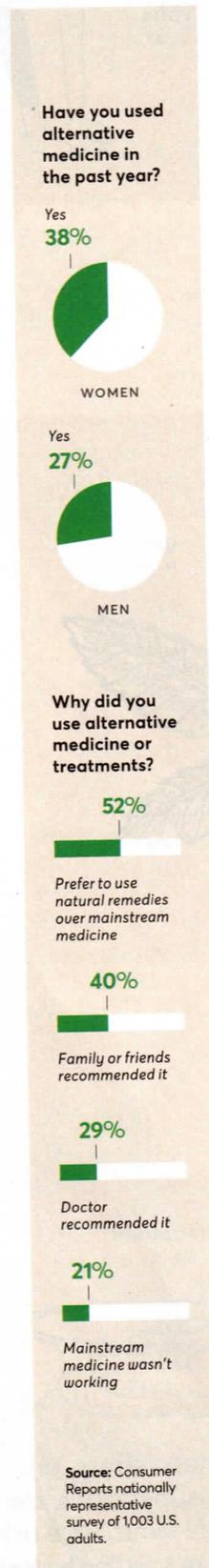
Even when research suggests that alternative treatments work, it's not always clear why—and could stem from the placebo effect. That's when your expectation that a treatment will help actually triggers a healing reaction. And it's powerful enough to get results. One trial of osteoarthritis patients, for example, compared a group taking supplements with one taking placebo pills. Most people in both groups reported significant reductions in pain.

To make the situation even more confusing, many staples of alternative medicine aren't subject to the same rules that govern doctors' offices and prescription and over-the-counter drugs. That means manufacturers don't have to prove that their treatments contain what their labels claim, or that they are effective or safe.

Still, consumers are right to be curious about alternative medicine. Practices such as yoga, meditation, and tai chi have stood up to the standards of modern medical research. Other alternative treatments can help people feel in control of their health and reduce their reliance on medication.

How can you tell the difference between alternative treatments that are worth trying and those you should stay away from?

Here, we'll give you our take on an A-to-Z grab bag of alternative treatments, along with tips to help you figure out which are safe and effective. (Want to see our sources for each entry? Go to [CR.org/altmedsources](http://CR.org/altmedsources).)



A

## Acupuncture

This ancient Chinese treatment is based on the belief that blocked qi, or energy, triggers pain and that inserting thin needles into specific spots on the body can relieve it. Some research shows that it works, especially for osteoarthritis, chronic headaches, and chronic back or neck pain. In a nationally representative 2017 Consumer Reports survey, nearly three-quarters of back pain sufferers who tried acupuncture said it helped. It may even ease depression, according to a 2018 review from the Cochrane Collaboration, an independent panel of experts. How it might do all that, though, is still a mystery. “One theory is that stimulating these points releases some of your body’s natural painkillers, like endorphins,” says Benjamin Kligler, M.D., national director

of the Integrative Health Coordinating Center at the Veterans Health Administration. Another possible factor: the placebo effect. A number of studies have found that “sham” acupuncture, where needles don’t pierce the skin, can provide some relief, too.

## Apple Cider Vinegar

With proponents claiming that just a tablespoon or two a day can help regulate blood sugar, promote weight loss, lower cholesterol, and reduce the risk of cancer, apple cider vinegar—also touted as a cure for skin problems and body odor—begins to sound a bit like a magic potion. But while it can add tang to a salad dressing, “there’s little scientific evidence to support these health claims,” says William Chey, M.D., a gastroenterologist and professor of medicine and nutrition at

the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In fact, it may harm you: For some people with heartburn, drinking the vinegar is like “throwing gas on a fire,” Chey says. Regular use can also trigger nausea, damage tooth enamel, and irritate the esophagus.

B

## Berries



Whether acai, blue, cran, goji, or straw, berries deserve their reputation as health food superstars. Many contain anthocyanins, “powerful phytochemicals that give berries their rich color,” says Jeffrey Blumberg, Ph.D., senior scientist at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston. These compounds act as anti-inflammatories, and may provide other health benefits. Certain berries, such as goji, contain other antioxidants.

C

## CBD

Thirteen percent of Americans in a recent Consumer Reports survey said they had tried cannabidiol, or CBD, for its potential health benefits, and of those, nearly 90 percent said it helped. Sold as oils, tinctures, vaporization liquids, and pills, CBD comes from marijuana or its cousin, hemp,

but doesn’t get users high. While CBD holds promise—the Food and Drug Administration recently approved the first drug that contains CBD, a treatment for two forms of epilepsy—many claims are still ahead of the science, says Donald Abrams, M.D., a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. “We need to see firm evidence that using it has benefits and is safe.” And research shows that CBD products might not always contain what their labels claim.

## Chelation

This therapy—where a medication known as EDTA is delivered into your bloodstream via an IV—is approved for one thing only: heavy metal poisoning. That can occur when children overload on adult-strength iron vitamins or people are exposed to large amounts of mercury, lead, or arsenic. The chelators bind to these heavy metals so that they’re flushed out in the urine. But a quick internet search shows that chelation therapy is offered as a treatment for everything from Alzheimer’s and autism to cancer and heart disease. Steer clear of these uses, which come with risks (kidney damage, mineral deficiencies, even neurodevelopmental problems and death) but no benefits, according to the American College of Medical Toxicology.

## Chiropractic

Chiropractors—with a license and a doctor of chiropractic (D.C.) degree—are trained to do spinal adjustments, one of the most common alternative-medicine practices. A large 2017 review found that these manipulations reduced lower back pain by about 10 points on a 100-point scale, similar to conventional treatments. Research suggests that

they might also help with headaches and neck pain. But consumers should steer clear of using chiropractic for nonmusculoskeletal problems, such as asthma, colic, and hypertension.

## Cupping

This 2,000-year-old Chinese practice—which involves applying suction cups to the skin and then yanking them off, theoretically to increase blood flow and support healing—has taken off in recent years, especially since several Olympic athletes and celebrities were spotted with the therapy’s telltale suction marks on their skin. A 2015 review in the journal *PLOS One* found that cupping could be effective in short-term relief of chronic neck and low-back pain. But more research that tests how the practice might work is needed. And the National Institutes of Health warns that cupping

can result in bruising, soreness, burns, and skin infections.

## D

### Detoxes & Cleanses

Drinking only juices for several days, sweltering in temperatures higher than 100° F, and trying a colonic—a procedure in which a machine pumps water into your rectum through a sterile tube—are purported to help people lose weight and rid themselves of toxins. These practices aren’t just unpleasant; research shows they’re not needed and can be dangerous. “Your body naturally gets rid of toxins on its own, so there’s no need to waste time and money on these methods,” Hochman says. A research review found that colonics had no benefit and can cause side effects ranging from cramping and nausea to kidney failure and death.

And while fasting for a day is generally safe, a detox diet or cleanse that severely restricts calories can cause headaches, weakness, and dehydration.

## E

### Ear Candling

This technique—promoted to remove earwax and treat sinus infections, sore throats, colds, and the flu—involves placing a hollow candle into your ear canal and then lighting the tip. “The theory is that the heat creates suction that withdraws the wax from your ear,” says Seth Schwartz, M.D., an ear, nose, and throat specialist at the Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle. But a 2017 review by Schwartz concluded that candling is ineffective and dangerous, with reports that it can block the ear with wax, damage hearing, and—surprise, surprise—set hair on fire.

## F

### Feverfew



Some research suggests that this herbal supplement may reduce the frequency of migraines in certain patients. In fact, the American Headache Society says a specific extract from the plant, called MIG-99, should be considered for migraine prevention. Another herb, butterbur, may also help—but only if chemicals called pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs), which can harm the liver, have been removed. So use only butterbur products with labels that say they are PA-free. And follow the precautions that apply to all supplements (see “Supplement Savvy,” at left).

## G

### Garcinia Cambogia

This supplement is flying off the shelves—sales have grown 15 percent in the past year alone, according to the *Nutrition Business Journal*—mostly because of claims that it can help people lose weight and burn fat. Trouble is, research doesn’t support either claim, and its active ingredient has been linked to serious conditions such as liver failure and mania. It also has a history of worrisome contamination. Last year the FDA advised consumers not to purchase one *Garcinia cambogia* product, *Fruta Planta Life*, because

## SUPPLEMENT SAVVY

People often assume supplements must be proved to be safe and effective before they can be sold. In fact, they don’t undergo the same safety and efficacy testing as prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

Federal regulations allow supplements to have general claims, such as “calcium builds strong bones,” but the FDA doesn’t vet the claims. And labels can’t claim that products diagnose, cure, or prevent any disease. A label can’t say ginkgo biloba, for example, will prevent dementia—even if that’s why people are buying it. You also can’t be sure that supplements contain the listed ingredients or dosages, or that they aren’t contaminated. For example, last spring, nearly 200 people were sickened after consuming kratom supplements contaminated with salmonella.

If you choose to take a supplement,

### Total U.S. Supplement Sales (2007 to 2017)



Source: Nutrition Business Journal.

look for a product with a third-party seal, such as NSF International certified or USP Verified. These seals don’t mean that a supplement works; they indicate that an independent group has verified that the amounts listed on labels are accurate and that the products are not contaminated.

To see a list of supplements to avoid, go to [CR.org/supplementstoavoid](http://CR.org/supplementstoavoid).

# Pain, Stress, and Insomnia:

## Chronic Pain

Meditation, tai chi, and yoga all seem to help back pain, joint pain caused by osteoarthritis, and fibromyalgia. Spinal manipulation, performed by a chiropractor or an osteopathic physician, can also help with back pain. Although experts are unsure how it works, acupuncture may be helpful, too. And cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a type of talk therapy that's well-studied and isn't technically considered alternative, can often help people cope with chronic pain.

## Stress

Try mindfulness, which involves staying focused on the moment, without judgment. In one 2017 study, a group of people with anxiety practiced mindfulness techniques—including certain forms of meditation, deep breathing, and yoga—for eight weeks, and another group attended a class on healthy lifestyle habits. The group that practiced mindfulness techniques had lower levels of stress-related hormones. Learn more about getting started with techniques from the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health at [nccih.nih.gov/health/stress](http://nccih.nih.gov/health/stress).

## Sleep Disturbances

Your best bet is healthy sleep habits, such as setting a regular bedtime and, at least an hour before bedtime, dimming the lights and turning off electronic devices. Some evidence suggests that melatonin, one of the most widely used natural products in the U.S., may help adults with specific kinds of sleep problems, such as those related to jet lag or shift work. But for other sleep problems, such as insomnia, melatonin's benefits have been shown to be minor at best: It might help you sleep just 8 additional minutes and could leave you groggy the next day. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I), which focuses on changing sleep-disrupting habits, might even be more effective and safer for insomnia than prescription sleep drugs or melatonin. —*Julia Calderone*

**Certain health conditions** have clear solutions. For a urinary tract infection, for example, you take an antibiotic. For high cholesterol, you're told to eat better, exercise more, and perhaps take a statin. But for some common and persistent ills—chronic pain, stress, and insomnia in particular—it can be hard to pinpoint the exact causes and even harder to treat.

"Sometimes [for these] really chronic problems, medicine doesn't have a very good solution," says Lisa Schwartz, M.D., co-director of the Center for Medicine and Media at The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice.

That often leads people to look to alternative medicine. In some cases, the options are untested, or even dangerous (see "Kava" and "Kratom" in our A-to-Z guide). But science has shown that several of these treatments, such as yoga, really can help. Here, some of the most effective alternative therapies for these problems.

it contained sibutramine, a prescription weight loss drug that was taken off the market in 2010 after it caused spikes in blood pressure and heart rate.

## Glucosamine and Chondroitin

These two substances, which are often combined and pitched as cures for people with aching joints, are among the top-selling supplements in the country. But a 2015 study of 1,625 people with osteoarthritis of the knees found that the combo was no better than a placebo in easing knee pain or preventing cartilage loss.

## Green Coffee

Unroasted, or “green,” coffee beans are rich in chlorogenic acid, a substance that preliminary research suggests may help burn glucose and fat, Blumberg says. But the studies behind these claims are too small and poorly designed to support the use of



green coffee, according to the NIH. Supplements have been linked to side effects, including headaches and urinary tract infections, and the Federal Trade Commission has sued at least one company selling them for making deceptive claims.

## H

## Homeopathy

Taking a substance that’s known to cause harm and diluting it to the near-vanishing point is the basis of this centuries-old practice. But be forewarned that numerous scientific studies—and a 2015 review of

176 studies—have shown that homeopathic treatments don’t work. And research suggests that certain homeopathic products contain unlisted ingredients or dangerously high amounts of other substances. Last year the FDA vowed to step up enforcement of homeopathic drugs they called “potentially harmful” and “unproven.”

## I

## Iodine

Some people with hypothyroidism (an underactive thyroid gland) need iodine supplements. And people who live near a nuclear power plant might consider keeping some on hand in case of emergency, because high doses of potassium iodide soon after radiation exposure can limit harm. But extra iodine can’t boost metabolism or speed weight loss. Most Americans already get plenty of the mineral from iodized salt and other foods. And getting too much—more than

1,100 micrograms per day, the NIH says—can cause some of the same problems as iodine deficiency.

## J

## Jellyfish

You may have seen ads for a supplement called Prevacen, pitched as a memory aid derived from jellyfish. But the FTC and the New York state attorney general’s office filed a lawsuit in 2017 accusing Prevacen’s manufacturer of false advertising, and no independent research backs up the company’s claim.

## K

## Kava

The root and stem of this plant, a member of the pepper family, are used in drinks and supplements to promote relaxation and ease anxiety. But in rare cases, kava has

## 4 TIPS FOR THE SMART AND SAFE USE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

**Do your research.** Try to find out what’s known about the safety and efficacy of any treatment you’re considering. Look for reputable sources, such as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health ([nccih.nih.gov/health](http://nccih.nih.gov/health)) and the Cochrane Collaboration ([cochrane.org](http://cochrane.org)). Ask your primary care provider, too; more and more of them are embracing some forms of alternative medicine, and may be good resources.

**Be choosy about practitioners.** If you’re going to an alternative health practitioner, such as an acupuncturist, make sure he or she is credentialed, with a state license where appropriate. Check with your primary care doctor to see whether he or she can make a referral. And be skeptical of someone who tries to sell you additional products or sign you up for a long-term treatment plan (beyond four to eight sessions), or recommends that you forgo conventional treatments.

**Consider the cost.** Ask about price up front, and talk to your insurance company if you’re not sure whether it’s covered; many alternative treatments are not. Also, talk to your provider about nonpharmaceutical options that are more likely to be covered by insurance, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and physical therapy.

**Think holistically.** Sometimes alternative treatments can help you reduce your reliance on medication, avoid surgical

intervention, or relieve the side effects of conventional treatments. Just consider how the alternative treatment could affect your health overall, for better or worse. The more serious the health problem, the more cautious you should be about turning to alternative medicine to treat it. Medications you’re already taking can also interact with certain dietary supplements, so talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before trying something new.

been linked to liver damage, including cirrhosis and hepatitis, and several countries have banned its sale. It can also impair driving, and may exacerbate Parkinson's disease and depression.

## Kratom

Promoted as a safe pain reliever, the FDA says it could be as addictive as opioids because it affects the same brain receptors. And there have been reports of kratom being laced with opioids or contaminated with salmonella. At least 44 deaths have been linked to kratom, and hundreds of users have suffered side effects, including seizures, liver damage, and withdrawal.

## L

### Light Therapy

Sitting in front of a special lamp during the darkest months of the year is a proven treatment for seasonal affective disorder. The sessions should last between 20 and 60 minutes and be done consistently to work best. And at least initially, it should be done under the guidance of an experienced professional. Light therapy may also help with depression and bipolar disorder.

## M

### Meditation

While there are many types of meditation, most have four things in common: a quiet, distraction-free location; a comfortable posture; a focus of attention (on breathing or a mantra, for example); and an open attitude. Research suggests that meditation may

# Massage

**A good rubdown** can do more than just relax you. Growing research shows that it can help some people with back pain or other kinds of pain, and those recovering from injury.

**Deep-tissue massage**, which emphasizes strong finger pressure to reach into the muscle, may be particularly good for back pain.

**Swedish massage**—the form most people are familiar with—uses long flowing strokes, circular motions, tapping, and kneading to promote relaxation. **Sports massage**, which can promote recovery and flexibility in athletes, combines deep-tissue and Swedish techniques.

**Myofascial trigger point therapy**—which focuses on painful trigger points—may be helpful for people with injuries or chronic pain.

**Craniosacral therapy**, which involves light touch to the head intended to relieve pain elsewhere in the body, is more controversial. Most research has found that it has no benefit, and one 2016 review said that the technique appeared to be "scientifically unfounded."

help lower blood pressure as well as ease anxiety, depression, insomnia, and even symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome and ulcerative colitis. Elizabeth Bradley, M.D., medical director of the Cleveland Clinic's Center for Functional Medicine, has her patients try this simple meditation: Breathe in for a count of four, hold for seven, then breathe out for eight while placing a hand on the belly to feel it moving.

## Melatonin

Melatonin, a hormone secreted by a gland in your brain, helps set your body's circadian rhythm: the 24-hour "clock" that controls your sleep cycle. People take melatonin supplements to help them sleep, and evidence indicates that it can help certain sleep problems, such as those stemming from jet lag or shift work. But a 2017 study found that the supplements often don't contain what their labels claim; some had serotonin, a chemical that regulates mood, instead.

## N

### Naturopathy

Naturopathic doctors (N.D.s) believe the body has an inherent self-healing ability, and some focus on questionable practices such as homeopathy (see "H") and intravenous vitamin treatments. In 20 states plus the District of Columbia, N.D.s can often order certain medical tests and write some prescriptions. While N.D.s have some formal medical education, it isn't as rigorous as that of medical doctors (M.D.s) and doctors of osteopathy (D.O.s). Appointments are rarely covered by insurance.



## Neti Pots

Shaped like a tea kettle, these vessels are designed to treat allergies, colds, and sinusitis by rinsing debris and mucus from your nose. And several studies show they may help. But take some precautions, such as using distilled water, because there have been reports of people developing serious bacterial infections after using the pots with unsterilized tap water. You can also try an over-the-counter saline nasal spray. These wash out pollen and other allergens, and loosen up mucus to ease your breathing.

## VITAMIN WISDOM

**Nearly half** of Americans take multivitamins, but these pills, along with other vitamin and mineral supplements, may not be doing much for anyone's health. "Multivitamins have an image of being able to compensate for deficiencies in the diet," says JoAnn Manson, M.D., a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of preventive medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "But [they'll] never be a substitute for a healthful and balanced diet."

For one, Manson says, your body can't absorb the nutrients from pills

as easily as it can from food. And vitamins can cause side effects. Too much supplemental calcium, for instance, might increase the risk of kidney stones.

That doesn't mean everyone should avoid supplements. Pregnant women need folate and prenatal vitamins, and breastfed infants need vitamin D and iron. Older adults and people with certain medical conditions may need vitamins, too. If you're unsure whether you need one, talk with your doctor. And try not to exceed 100 percent of your recommended daily value of any nutrient.

## Omega-3

Omega-3 fatty acids—found in fatty fish, nuts, and seeds—are frequently cited as heart-healthy. A 2017 research review by the American Heart Association concluded that the pills might provide some benefit to people with a history of heart disease. But there wasn't enough evidence to show whether they improve cardiac health in people without existing heart problems.

## Probiotics

These "good bacteria" are thought to promote a healthy environment in your belly. Consumers in the U.S. spent more than \$2 billion on

probiotic supplements in 2017, according to the Nutrition Business Journal. Some research shows that specific strains of probiotics can help protect against antibiotic-related diarrhea and even Clostridium difficile, a dangerous infection often picked up at hospitals. But this year, a study concluded that little research has assessed the safety of probiotic supplements. For general health, you're probably better off getting probiotics from your diet, in yogurt or fermented foods such as sauerkraut and tempeh, Blumberg says. These may offer benefits beyond what you can find in a supplement.

## Qi Gong

Like tai chi (see "T"), qi gong is an ancient mind-body practice that uses a variety of postures, movements, breathing techniques, and sound to improve mental focus and promote health. A 2015 Cochrane review hinted that qi gong might help lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, though more study is needed. Other research suggests it can help people with fibromyalgia and other pain conditions.

## Red Yeast Rice

A daily dose of this supplement can sometimes lower cholesterol as much as the prescription drug lovastatin (Mevacor and generic), according to a research review. That's no surprise: It's chemically similar to that drug. Of course, that means it carries many of the same risks, too, including kidney, muscle, and liver problems. And because it's sold as a supplement, not a prescription

drug, insurance probably won't cover the cost. More important, "consumers have no idea how much of the drug they are getting, and too low of a dose won't do anything, while too high could cause harm," says Pieter Cohen, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. His 2017 study found that amounts of the active ingredient in red yeast rice supplements varied substantially among products.

## Reiki

Some folks swear by this technique, in which a practitioner places his or her hands lightly on or even slightly above your body. Supporters claim this somehow stimulates your body's own healing response, but there's little scientific research to back this up or prove that it works.

## Saw Palmetto

Americans spent \$183 million last year on this herbal remedy, touted to treat symptoms of an enlarged prostate. But a Cochrane Collaboration review of 32 studies concluded that it was no better than a placebo at improving symptoms such as frequent and painful urination.

## Tai Chi

This centuries-old martial art, which has been dubbed "moving meditation," combines physical exercise with meditation. Research suggests that it cuts the risk of falls in older adults, helps with chronic pain, and may ease symptoms of dementia, depression, osteoarthritis, and Parkinson's disease. Tai chi is

very safe, “and it’s something that you can learn and do on your own, whenever you want,” says Kligler at the Veterans Health Administration. While you can do tai chi with an instructional DVD or online video, it’s best to start with a class because if you don’t position your body properly, you could end up with minor injuries.

## Tea

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It’s the most widely consumed drink in the world after water, and research has shown that regular tea drinkers have a lower risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Green, white, and black teas are all “rich in flavonoids, which are the antioxidants that give tea its health benefits,” Blumberg says.

## Turmeric

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This golden spice—a staple of Indian food—contains curcumin, touted for its anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory properties. But much of that research is in mice. When humans eat turmeric, little of the curcumin is even absorbed. Still, go ahead and add turmeric to your food if you like. And check with your doctor if you take turmeric supplements; they could interact with certain medications, such as blood thinners.

## V

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### Vetiver Oil

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Extracted from a plant, this essential oil is often used in aromatherapy. A review published earlier this year found that vetiver oil—along with lemongrass, cilantro, cinnamon, and patchouli oils—has antifungal properties. Other research suggests that tea tree oil is an effective

antibacterial. And the National Cancer Institute says that aromatherapy with various essential oils may lessen anxiety and reduce nausea. But these oils can irritate the skin, cause allergic reactions, and increase sun sensitivity. And they should never be consumed. In one study, repeated exposure to tea tree and lavender oil mimicked the effects of estrogen, causing breast growth in boys, though that effect was reversed when treatment stopped.

## W

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### Wild Yam

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If you’re in the midst of menopausal hot flashes, you may be tempted to try wild yam, a plant promoted as a

natural alternative to estrogen replacement therapy. “Although it contains a chemical that can be converted into estrogen in a laboratory setting, your body doesn’t have the enzyme you need to do that,” says JoAnn Pinkerton, M.D., division director of the Midlife Health center at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

## X

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### Xylitol

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This sweetener, commonly found in sugarless gum, is sometimes touted as a way to help prevent ear infections. And a 2016 Cochrane review concluded that healthy children who got xylitol—through gum, lozenges, or

a syrup—cut their risk of ear infection from 30 to 22 percent. But two caveats: There’s not enough evidence to know whether it helps in children most prone to the infections, and high intakes could trigger diarrhea and upset stomach.

## Z

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### Zinc

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Lozenges of this mineral seem to shorten the duration and severity of colds—if you start taking it within 24 hours of your first symptom. Stick with about 80 to 90 mg per day; too much can cause diarrhea, nausea, stomach cramps, and vomiting. A safer bet: Consume zinc-rich foods, including cashews, chickpeas, crab, and yogurt.