

Natural therapies and cancer

What are natural therapies?

Most people get some kind of cancer treatment from doctors, like surgery, chemotherapy (“chemo”), radiation therapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy or hormone therapy. These treatments try to get rid of the cancer or make it smaller.

Some people also use natural therapies (sometimes called complementary therapies) to help cope with the cancer and treatment. Natural therapies include:

- traditional bush medicines and foods
- massage and aromatherapy
- spiritual healing, prayer or meditation
- herbal medicine
- acupuncture
- counselling, art therapy and music therapy.

Natural therapies sometimes help people feel better while they are being treated for cancer. When a natural therapy is used *instead* of proven treatments from doctors (like chemo or radiation therapy), it’s called an alternative therapy. Alternative therapies may not have been properly tested and may be dangerous. Cancer Council does not recommend using alternative therapies to treat cancer.

How may natural therapies help?

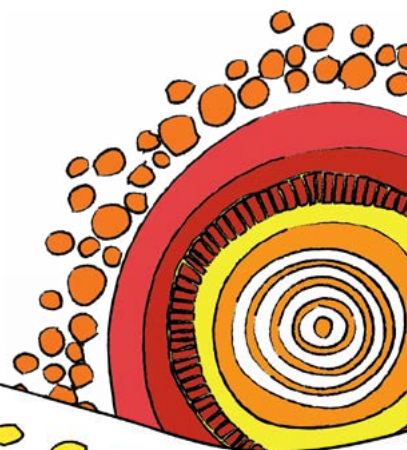
You may have problems caused by the cancer and its treatment, such as pain, feeling sick, not being hungry, feeling tired, not sleeping well, rashes, sore gums, stress, fear or sadness. Some women may have women’s issues. You may find that certain natural therapies or medicines can help with these problems. What you use will depend on what you want to try and what your doctor thinks will help.

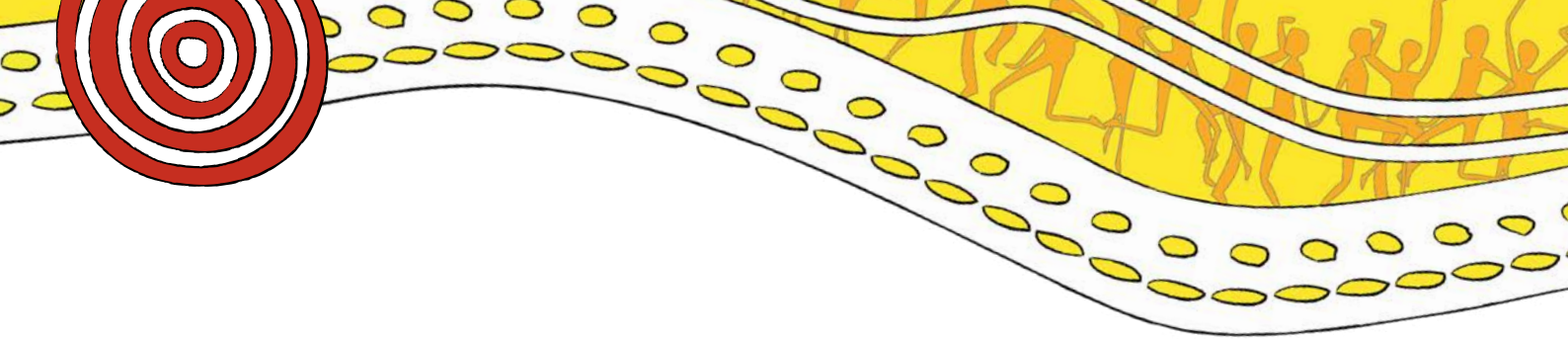
Tell your doctor about any natural therapies

It’s important to talk to your doctor if you want to use natural therapies. This is to make sure they are safe and will work well with the treatment from the doctor.



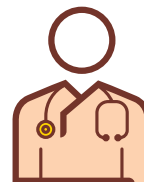
Talk to your doctor and see a qualified natural therapist before using any natural therapies. It’s important to check that these therapies are safe before using them.





When can I use natural therapies?

This depends on your health and the cancer treatment you're having. Your doctor and natural therapist will work out the best time for you. It may be okay to use different types of natural therapy while having cancer treatment, but some natural therapies can stop cancer treatment from working properly. You may need to wait until cancer treatment is over to use some natural therapies.



Who can I talk to about bush medicines?

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use traditional bush medicines to help them get through cancer.

If you want to use bush medicine:

- talk to your Aboriginal Health Service or Worker, an Elder, or community
- talk to your doctor or nurse about any natural therapies or bush medicines that you are thinking of using
- be sure to continue the cancer treatments you and your doctors decide on.



It's important to keep going to all of your cancer treatment sessions. Missing a session can make it harder to treat the cancer. Talk to your doctor about any worries you might have.

More information

- Call Cancer Council 13 11 20
- Visit aboriginal.cancercouncil.com.au
- Visit menzies.edu.au/cancer
- Ask your local Aboriginal Health Service
- Visit the Australian Traditional-Medicine Society atms.com.au
- Visit the Naturopaths & Herbalists Association of Australia nhaa.org.au



This fact sheet is based on a resource produced by Cancer Council NSW in collaboration with the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council, and with funding from Cancer Australia. The original version was published in June 2010. This June 2025 edition has been reviewed by cancer experts and Aboriginal people with an experience of cancer.

The design features elements from the artwork *Healing Journey* by Carissa Paglino. Carissa was born and raised in Awabakal country (Newcastle) and is a descendant of the Wanaruah people from the Upper Hunter Valley in NSW. Cancer Council NSW's respect symbol (below) was designed by Marcus Lee, a descendant of the Karajarri people.



Cancer Council NSW acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past and present.

