

As a forward-thinking woman who embraces safe and natural health strategies for you and your family, you'll be delighted by this verdict: Scientists have compiled compelling new evidence affirming the ability of many complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) to prevent and treat a host of common ailments—giving an important stamp of approval to healing practices that have long resided at the fringe of conventional medicine.

The endorsement comes from no less august an authority than the National Institutes of Health. In 1999, Congress established the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the NIH; its sole aim was to rigorously assess the restorative powers of natural products, such as herbs and supplements, as well as mind and body therapies, like hypnosis and acupuncture. Thousands of studies and more than a decade later, “the science shows which approaches work,” says Josephine Briggs, MD, director of NCCAM.

The proven therapies have much to recommend them. They are gentle on your body and can often replace prescription drugs. They're a safe adjunct (hence their “complementary” moniker) to medication and other conventional treatment. And they're easy on your wallet, usually less expensive than traditional care and, increasingly, covered by insurance. Here are some common conditions that new research says respond best to these uncommon—but extraordinarily effective—treatments.

Massage FOR DEPRESSION

IT'S A NO-BRAINER: Chronic mental and emotional stress, both of which can lead to depression, are eased by massage, so it's hardly a surprise that a number of studies conclude that massage therapy helps lift the blues. Researchers suspect that massage spurs the release of mood-boosting endorphins, perhaps in response to both physical manipulation and intimate hands-on touch. Some studies show that massage therapy is as effective as prescription antidepressants, such as Prozac and Paxil, in relieving anxiety, a major contributor to depression.

HIDDEN BENEFIT: Massage therapy relieves stiffness and pain and speeds healing of sports injuries.

Tai Chi FOR INSOMNIA

ARE YOU A CHRONIC tosser and turner? Can't sleep beyond the first chirps and tweets of the morning chorus? Try tai chi. The slow, meditative exercise regimen, originally developed as a martial art in China more than 2,500 years ago and practiced widely across Asia today, improves sleep quality in adults with moderate insomnia, CAM researchers say. The benefits, linked to tai chi's well-established ability to reduce stress, kicked in after participants practiced the routine for 16 weeks. You will need regular instruction at first, so look for classes at your Y or gym.

HIDDEN BENEFIT: Tai chi helps improve balance and reduce risk of falling.

STYLING BY HEATHER CHONTOS; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY JANE CHOI AND LYNN LAMORTE, BOTH FOR VIVIAN ARTISTS; ON OPENER: FABRICS, CANDLE, AND GREEN FOWL BY AIC; CAIPEI AND HOPPE; MEASURING SPOON BY ZAMBURINI; BAC