

Adverse events associated with paediatric complementary and alternative medicine

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Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is a broad umbrella term for a variety of practices (e.g., acupuncture, chiropractic, massage therapy) and natural health products (e.g., herbals, homeopathic remedies, vitamins). Recent surveys suggest that, although 20 to 50% of children use CAM, many families do not disclose use to their physicians. With CAM use so common among children, studies are needed to determine whether adverse events (AEs) are associated with paediatric CAM use.

The CPSP distributed the survey to 2,489 paediatricians in January 2006, to identify the frequency and severity of AEs associated with paediatric CAM. An AE was defined as any unfavourable or unintended sign (including abnormal laboratory finding), symptom or disease associated with the use of CAM. The survey asked three main questions: 1) how often do you ask patients about CAM use; 2) how many CAM-related AEs have you seen in the last year; and 3) have you seen a delayed diagnosis or treatment due to CAM use in a patient?

Of the 582 (23%) returned surveys, 38% of paediatricians stated that they ask patients about their CAM use. Only 22% of respondents mentioned that patients disclosed CAM use before being questioned. Forty-two of the paediatricians (7%) said they had seen an AE associated with CAM use in the previous year, most commonly with natural health product use. In addition, 105 paediatricians reported 488 incidents of patients who had delayed diagnosis/treatment because of CAM use.

This study suggests that paediatric CAM-related AEs warrant further investigation. We suspect that our findings under-represent AEs related to paediatric CAM and support an active surveillance model to accurately assess incidence. The research team intends to partner with the CPSP to investigate serious AEs associated with paediatric CAM use. In 2007, an educational poster about CAM will be distributed by the CPS to improve communication about CAM use between families and paediatricians.

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