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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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Ayurveda is a medical system that originated in India. Oral formulations, dietary and lifestyle changes, and yoga or meditation are the main components. Herbs such as curcumin have beneficial effects but should be used under supervision. Yoga and meditation help alleviate side effects associated with cancer and its treatments.

Derived from the Sanskrit words “ayur” (life) and “veda” (knowledge), Ayurveda dates back more than 3,000 years. Treatment is tailored to the individual and consists of oral formulations containing herbal, mineral, spice, and animal components; cleansing practices; dietary and lifestyle changes; and improving mental balance through yoga or meditation.

Commonly used herbs in Ayurveda, such as [ashwagandha \(*Withania somnifera*\)](#), [guggul \(*Commiphora mukul*\)](#), [boswellia \(*Boswellia serrata*\)](#), [gotu kola \(*Centella asiatica*\)](#), [curcumin \(*Curcuma longa*\)](#), [ginger \(*Zingiber officinale*\)](#), [aloe \(*Aloe barbadensis*\)](#), and [garlic \(*Allium sativum*\)](#), exhibit antioxidant, antimicrobial, immunomodulatory, or anti-inflammatory properties.

Studies in humans however, are quite limited. Some data suggest various Ayurvedic formulations may be helpful for diabetes, knee osteoarthritis, or rheumatoid arthritis. However, additional studies are needed. One study of [guggulipid](#) to treat high cholesterol found it may actually raise cholesterol levels. [Curcumin](#) is among the most extensively studied, but positive findings on cancer preventive effects are preliminary.

Lifestyle changes and mind-body modalities are also a core component of Ayurveda. [Yoga](#) and [meditation](#) have been shown to help reduce symptoms associated with cancer and its treatments.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat cancer-related symptoms

[Yoga](#) has been shown to improve sleep, mood, and quality of life, and reduce stress in cancer patients both during treatment

and throughout survivorship. [Meditation](#) has been shown to reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure, and enhance well-being both in the general population and in oncology settings.

- To treat diabetes
Several herbs used in Ayurveda have blood glucose-lowering effects, but the clinical evidence for their use is not strong. More studies are needed.
- To lower high cholesterol
A study of the herbal medicine [guggulipid](#) found it may actually increase cholesterol levels.
- To treat arthritis
A few preliminary studies suggest benefit with various Ayurvedic formulations, but additional confirming studies are needed.

What are the side effects?

- Skin hypersensitivity and rash with [guggulipid](#).
- Itching, GI discomfort, nausea, oral ulcers and elevated liver enzymes with Ayurvedic formulations in one study.

Case reports

- Heavy metals, liver toxicity, and arsenic poisoning with various Ayurvedic preparations.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Although heavy metals such as lead, gold, and silver are traditionally used in Ayurvedic formulations, the use of lead for its assumed benefit has been a cause of concern. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 12 cases of lead poisoning associated with the use of Ayurvedic medications.
- Improper use of nasal rinsing devices such as Neti Pots have been associated with rare but severe infections. Only distilled or sterile water should be used and these devices must be cleaned properly after each use.

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking phenytoin: The Ayurvedic syrup shankhapushpi causes decreased blood concentrations of phenytoin.
- You are taking CYP450 substrate drugs: Several ayurvedic herbs induce or inhibit CYP enzymes, and may reduce effectiveness or increase the risk of side effects of these drugs.
- You are pregnant or nursing: *Adhatoda vasica*, an herb often used for respiratory tract ailments, may induce labor or abortion, and other ayurvedic formulations have caused birth defects.

Special Point:

- Although Ayurveda is available in a few clinics in North America, there is no licensure for practicing Ayurveda in the United States.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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