The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is common in today’s society. With 42% of people using some form of CAM, it is troublesome to learn that approximately half of these CAM users are not disclosing such information to their physicians. Even higher rates of usage (up to 84%) are reported by children with cancer. Since the CAM treatments are being used by these children as an adjunct to chemotherapy and radiation, it is important that the oncologist knows about such additional treatments and can look out for possible interactions. Assuming disclosure rates concerning children with cancer are similarly low, it is necessary to look deeper into the opinions of physicians and society related to CAM therapies and to determine what barriers may be in place that are preventing patients and/or their parents from disclosing such information. It is also important to determine what changes must be made to create a medical setting where both doctors and patients feel comfortable discussing CAM and recognize the importance of having such conversations.

A study was conducted at the Integrative Therapies Program for Children with Cancer at Columbia University to collect descriptive data about the use of CAM in survivors of childhood cancer. The questionnaire used for the study gathered demographic and treatment information, in addition to detailed information about CAM use. A total of 51 patients participated in the study. The data was analyzed to determine rates of CAM use and disclosure to the physician. Further analysis looked to see if any trends existed between such rates and various demographic and treatment characteristics. The clinical research was supplemented with a review of the existing literature related to CAM use by cancer patients, CAM use in the field of pediatrics, benefits and risks associated with CAM use, and reasons for disclosure versus nondisclosure of CAM therapies.

Out of 51 patients, 49 (96%) were using at least one CAM treatment. The three categories of CAM with the highest rates of use were nutritional supplements by mouth (71%), diet change (59%), and touch therapies/manual healing (45%). The most common reasons given for the purpose of using the CAM therapies were to prevent future cancers, to strengthen the immune system, to maintain general health, and to deal with the many side effects of cancer treatment, including toxicity in the body, stress, anxiety, pain, nausea, and weight loss/gain. No complementary treatments were used in lieu of conventional treatment. When asked how effective the treatments were based on their intended purposes, 93% were reported to be either somewhat or very effective. The overall disclosure rate was 45%. The highest disclosure rate was for the use of
herbal supplements (78%) and the lowest was for yoga/movement therapy (18%). No trends were found between CAM use/disclosure and race, religion, family income, time in treatment, type of cancer, or parental education attainment. There was no increase in rates of use or disclosure since the introduction of an integrative therapies program at the cancer clinic.

There are several reasons shown to prevent disclosure in this area, including: (1) the doctor did not ask; (2) the patient does not think it is important to tell; (3) the patient fears the doctor’s reaction; (4) the patient does not perceive what they are using as CAM; (5) both the doctor and patient believe that discussions about CAM are a poor use of time; (6) the patient believes that the two types of medicine should be kept separate; and (7) the presence of cultural or language barriers. Understanding the many risks and benefits associated with CAM use allows one to see that nondisclosure puts the patients in an unfavorable situation, where they could be at risk for different medical complications or miss out on treatments that could greatly improve their quality of life. Disclosure is also necessary to maintain a strong doctor-patient relationship.

With such high rates of CAM use and low rates of disclosure in children with cancer, there is cause for concern. In order for the physician to provide the patient with optimal care, he or she needs to be informed about all treatments that the patient is using. Therefore, recommendations must be made and implemented to increase rates of disclosure. While some of the responsibility must fall on the patient to be open with the doctor about CAM use, the doctor should also be held accountable for asking the necessary questions and promoting an open conversation. Conventional and alternative practitioners must also learn to respect one another and work together in the best interest of their patients.