

Fact Sheet: Complementary and Alternative Healthcare

Complementary and alternative healthcare (CAHC) may be part of client care choices. While some CAHC interventions are considered mainstream, not all have a scientific basis. Because of this, it may be unclear how the intervention works, its indications for use, and possible side effects. Thus, the impact on the client's health status may be unpredictable (College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba [CRNM], 2018).

This document is intended for nurses¹ who are considering using CAHC in their practice, or working with clients who are using CAHC, to help them understand:

- what treatments and practices that are considered CAHC;
- their accountabilities when working with clients using or inquiring about CAHC;
- which natural health products and medical devices are approved by Health Canada; and
- when CAHC is considered nursing practice.

Complementary and Alternative Healthcare

Complementary practices are used alongside conventional healthcare while alternative practices are used in place of conventional healthcare practices (CRNM, 2018).

Traditional health practices are also considered CAHC. It is important to honour and respect these practices when providing care to clients. The importance of traditional health practices is recognized in [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action](#) which states: “We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian healthcare system to recognize the value of Aboriginal health practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and elders where requested by Aboriginal patients” (p.3).

Considerations for the Nurse Providing CAHC

As with all nursing interventions, when providing CAHC, nurses are accountable to:

- work within their [scope of practice](#)²;
- apply the conduct outlined in the [Code of Conduct for Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners](#) to their practice;
- practice in accordance with the [standards of practice](#); and
- ensure evidence-informed, safe, competent, compassionate and ethical practice.

When caring for clients who are using or seeking information about CAHC, nurses must provide information based on best evidence to help the client make an informed decision. It is important to seek reliable sources of evidence to share with clients to support their decision.

¹ The term “nurse” refers to graduate nurses, registered nurses, and nurse practitioners.

² Graduate nurses must adhere to the [Fact Sheet: Graduate Nurse Scope of Practice](#).

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When providing care or information to clients about CAHC, nurses must:

- obtain a comprehensive client history, including any CAHC practices the client is presently using;
- consider indications, potential interactions, client preferences, quality of life, and contextual factors; for example, family issues, cultural beliefs and determinants of health, and potential interactions;
- assist the client to obtain information to support informed decisions about their desired CAHC therapy;
- respect the client's right to choose their treatment, ensuring that the client understands implications of CAHC on any existing diagnoses, including interactions with existing treatments;
- ensure that clients provide informed consent to treatment;
- collaborate and consult with the appropriate healthcare providers regarding the proposed CAHC and share any concerns if CAHC could potentially pose a risk to the client's safety;
- refer to other healthcare providers when the specific CAHC is outside of the nurse's scope of practice;
- document all discussions with the client, including information provided, recommendations, therapies chosen, interventions provided, and a follow up plan; and
- follow employer policies related to the use and/or provision of CAHC in the practice setting; if there are no policies in place, nurses are encouraged to advocate for such policies to employers.

If you have questions regarding your legal obligations when answering questions or providing care to clients receiving CAHC, please contact the [Canadian Nurses Protective Society](#). They also have the following resource that could be helpful: [Ask a Lawyer: Complementary Therapies](#).

Natural Health Products and Medical Devices Approved by Health Canada

There may be circumstances when a nurse becomes aware of a natural health product (NHP) or medical device that could be incorporated as a CAHC intervention. NHPs include herbal remedies, sunscreens, vitamins and minerals (Health Canada, 2024a). Medical devices cover a wide range of health or medical instruments used in the treatment, mitigation, diagnosis, or prevention of a disease or abnormal physical condition; however, not all NHPs and medical devices are approved by Health Canada (Health Canada, 2024b). For example, a product or device could be available for sale to consumers internationally but may not be approved for use in Canada.

In Canada, all NHPs are regulated under the [Natural Health Products Regulations](#), which ensure that Canadians have access to NHPs that are safe, effective, and high quality. Similarly, medical devices are reviewed and approved by Health Canada. Nurses are accountable to seek and use the best available knowledge to inform their practice, which includes understanding whether a NHP or medical device is approved by Health Canada.; information on the approval process for drugs, medical devices, natural health products and homeopathic medicine is available at: [Drug and Health Product Review and Approval - Canada.ca](#) and at: [Medical Devices - Canada.ca](#). If a NHP or medical device is not included on the approved list by Health Canada, nurses should refrain from using or recommending that product until they have consulted with Health Canada directly. Information on drugs and health products by Health Canada is available at: [Drug and Health Products Portal](#).

When is CAHC Considered Nursing Practice?

It is important to remember that CAHC therapies are not always considered nursing practice. It is considered nursing practice when CAHC is provided within a nurse-client relationship based on a nursing plan of care which includes:

- client assessment;
- identification of client needs and goals;
- development of appropriate interventions to address client needs and goals; and
- evaluation of the client's progress.

If a nurse is providing CAHC in a non-nursing role it is not considered nursing practice. If you have questions regarding your role as a nurse in CAHC and for help determining whether the therapy you are providing is considered nursing practice, please contact a Nurse Consultant at practiceconsultation@nanb.nb.ca.

If a CAHC therapy is not considered nursing practice, nurses can still provide this CAHC, however they cannot:

- indicate that they are providing nursing services;
- represent themselves as a nurse while providing the therapy; and
- count these hours towards their registration.

If you are considering initiating CAHC as part of a self-employed practice, please refer to [Guidelines for Self-Employed Practice](#).

Resources

[Code of Conduct for Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners](#)
[Standards of Practice for Nurse Practitioners](#)
[Standards for Documentation](#)
[Standards for Medication Management](#)

[Standards for the Nurse-Client Relationship](#)

[Standards for Cultural Safety](#)

[Fact Sheet: Consent](#)

[Guidelines for Self-Employed Practice](#)

[Use of Professional Title](#)

References

College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba. (2018). *Complementary and alternative health care*.
https://www.crnmb.ca/uploads/document/document_file_251.pdf?t=1615315712

Health Canada. (2024a, May 17). *Natural health product regulation in Canada: Overview*.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/natural-non-prescription/regulation.html>

Health Canada. (2024b, August 1). *Medical devices*. www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/medical-devices.html

Content of this document has been adapted from the Nova Scotia College of Nurse's [Complementary & Alternative Health Care Practice Guideline](#) (2020).