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Coding Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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Cancer patients are typically treated with approaches ranging from surgery and radiotherapy to chemotherapy or immunotherapy. However, millions of patients every year seek additional options from a menu of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).¹ According to a January 2018 article in *JAMA Oncology*,¹ patients may feel that conventional healthcare too often leaves physicians with little time and attention to commit to all of the areas in which patients require support. In contrast, practitioners specializing in complementary and alternative medicine schedule dedicated intervals focused on the patient's priorities.

People have used complementary and alternative medicine for thousands of years in pursuit of health and well-being.² However, because rigorous clinical trials for CAM therapies have not been completed, the safety and effectiveness of these treatments remain uncertain. For example, there is limited information relating to the correct dose and toxicity of some natural remedies or to interactions of natural products with prescription medications.

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a division of the National Institutes of Health, is the federal government's leading agency for scientific research on the diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine. According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), complementary and alternative medicine is the term for medical products and practices that are not

part of standard medical care.³ The NCI provides the following additional definitions:

- **Standard medical care** is medicine that is practiced by licensed and/or registered health professionals. Some standard medical care practitioners are also practitioners of CAM.
- **Alternative medicine** is treatment used instead of standard medical treatment.
- **Complementary medicine** includes treatments that are used along with standard medical treatments but are not considered to be standard of practice.
- **Integrative medicine** is a total approach to medical care that combines standard medicine with CAM practices that are demonstrated to be safe and effective. This approach treats the patient's mind, body, and spirit.

The Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine is a division of the NCI in the Division of Cancer Treatment and Diagnosis. This office is responsible for NCI's research agenda in complementary and alternative medicine as it relates to cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and symptom management.⁴ There are several different types of CAM that include but may not be limited to the following:

1. **Biologically based practices.** Substances that are found in nature and used for diet or nutrition. Examples include herbal products, vitamins, creams, ointments, Di Bella cancer therapy, bioidentical compounded hormone therapy, Greek cancer cure, Kelly's nutritional-metabolic

therapy, Livingston-Wheeler therapy, Revici cancer treatment, and dietary supplements.

2. **Energy medicine.** Techniques that involve the use of energy fields. Examples include Reiki, shiatsu, therapeutic touch, moxibustion, pulsed fields, magnetic fields, electromagnetic, and/or alternating current or direct current fields.

3. **Manipulative and body-based practices.** Manual techniques that are used to manipulate or move one or more parts of the body. Examples include various massage techniques, exercise programs, oriental massage, Swedish massage, acupuncture, acupressure, Pilates, myotherapy, craniosacral therapy, neural therapy, hippotherapy, yoga, and/or reflexology.

4. **Mind-body medicine.** Techniques designed to enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms. Examples include biofeedback, hypnotherapy, meditation, relaxation therapy, prayer, mental healing, Gerson therapy, spiritual healing, aromatherapy, light and color therapy, and/or therapies that use creative outlets such as art, music, or dance.

5. **Whole medicine systems.** Medicine based on theory and practice. Examples include homeopathy, naturopathy, balneotherapy, and traditional Indian medicine such as Ayurveda.

Many of these treatments are profiled in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, a peer-reviewed journal providing scientific research for the evaluation and

integration of complementary and alternative medicine into mainstream medical practice. Journal coverage includes botanical medicine, acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, mind–body medicine, nutrition and dietary supplements, integrative health, yoga, Ayurveda, naturopathy, homeopathy, tai chi, qi gong, massage therapy, energy medicine, neurostimulation, integrative biophysics, and comparative effectiveness.

Insurance Coverage

According to the American Cancer Society, insurance companies will generally not cover treatments that have not been proven to be helpful for the illness or symptoms experienced by the patient.⁵ As with many other services, it will probably be necessary to review the individual insurer's policy. For example, HealthNet states, "The Plan considers complementary and alternative medicine to NOT be medically necessary, except as specified in the member's benefit document."⁶ The Aetna policy provides the following coverage information⁷:

Aetna considers alternative medicine interventions medically necessary if they are supported by adequate evidence of safety and effectiveness in the peer-reviewed published medical literature.

According to its Complementary and Alternative Medicine policy, Aetna considers acupuncture, biofeedback, electrical stimulation, and chiropractic services to be

"medically necessary for properly selected members, subject to applicable benefit plan limitations and exclusions." In addition, this policy lists over two pages of alternative medicine interventions that are considered experimental and/or investigational. This payer notes that the efficacy of alternative medicine therapies is generally unproven, with some shown to be ineffective or even harmful.

United Healthcare publishes a Coverage Summary, which states, "Complementary and alternative medicine is not a covered benefit," although some members may be eligible for acupuncture reimbursement.⁸

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee has also published a CAM policy that states that these alternative and complementary treatments are considered to be investigational.⁹ Due primarily to the lack of insurance coverage, Americans spend approximately \$33 billion dollars annually out of pocket for CAM treatments and products.


Cancer programs generally utilize CPT[®] procedure coding, International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision, Clinical Modification diagnosis coding, and Healthcare Common Procedure Coding System Level II service and supply codes for charge capture and billing purposes (see Table 1, page 11 and Table 2, page 12). Due to the limited availability of codes for CAM, some services performed can be internally tracked but do not have nationally recognized billing codes.

In addition to the code sets recognized for insurance billing, there are ABC Codes that describe healthcare interventions not included in other code sets (Table 3, page 12). These codes were developed by Alternative Link Incorporated in 1996, and in 2003 the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services approved a two-year program of commercial use and evaluation. In September 2006 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services denied further use of ABC codes because they were not named a standard, designated code

set under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

ABC codes fill in the missing gaps found in traditional code sets and can be used in practice management, medical record keeping, and other administrative activities.¹⁰ It is important to recognize that though these codes may not contribute to reimbursement, they are valuable for tracking time and work effort, generating reports for individual staff member productivity and overall management of patient and work flow.

There are nearly 4,200 ABC codes that describe approximately 1.4 billion episodes of alternative medicine, including herbal medicine, massage therapy, naturopathy, chiropractic, Ayurvedic medicine, homeopathy, nursing care, and midwifery.¹¹ Each ABC code consists of a string of five alphabetic characters organized in a hierarchical structure that groups similar products, remedies, treatments, and supplies together. This five-character code is followed by a two-character code that identifies the type of practitioner who performed the service defined by the procedure code. For example, the two-character code would identify practitioners such as acupuncturists, naturopaths, reflexologists, and other individuals who deliver complementary and alternative medicine.

It is unlikely that all complementary and alternative medicine practices will have an equal impact on cancer care. According to the NCI, cancer patients who are using or considering using complementary or alternative therapy should talk to their healthcare professional. It is generally helpful if the attending physician writes a prescription for the alternative or complementary therapy; then, if there is no insurance coverage, the patient may be able to use medical savings plan dollars for the procedure or treatment. In addition, some healthcare plans require preauthorization to ensure that the patient's diagnosis meets requirements when coverage is available. 

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Table 1. CPT Procedure Codes for Complementary Medical Procedures

CODE	DESCRIPTOR
90875	Individual psychophysiological therapy incorporating biofeedback training by any modality (face-to-face with the patient), with psychotherapy (e.g., insight oriented, behavior modifying or supporting psychotherapy); 30 minutes
90876	Individual psychophysiological therapy incorporating biofeedback training by any modality (face-to-face with the patient), with psychotherapy (e.g., insight oriented, behavior modifying or supporting psychotherapy); 45 minutes
90880	Hypnotherapy
90901	Biofeedback training by any modality
96900	Actinotherapy (ultraviolet light)
96902	Microscopic examination of hairs plucked or clipped by the examiner (excluding hair collected by the patient) to determine telogen and anagen counts or structural hair shaft abnormality
97014	Application of a modality to one or more areas; electrical stimulation (unattended)
97124	Therapeutic procedure, one or more areas, each 15 minutes: massage, including effleurage, petrissage, and/or tapotement (stroking, compression, percussion)
97140	Manual therapy techniques (e.g., mobilization/manipulation, manual lymphatic drainage, manual traction), one or more regions, each 15 minutes
97810	Acupuncture, one or more needles; without electrical stimulation, initial 15 minutes of personal one-on-one contact with the patient
97811	Acupuncture, one or more needles; without electrical stimulation, each additional 15 minutes of personal one-on-one contact with patient, with reinsertion of needle(s)
97813	Acupuncture, one or more needles; with electrical stimulation, initial 15 minutes of personal one-on-one contact with the patient
97814	Acupuncture, one or more needles; with electrical stimulation, each additional 15 minutes of personal one-on-one contact with the patient, with reinsertion of needle(s)
98940	Chiropractic manipulative treatment; spinal, one to two regions
98941	Chiropractic manipulative treatment; spinal, three to four regions
98942	Chiropractic manipulative treatment; spinal, five regions
98943	Chiropractic manipulative treatment; extraspinal, one or more regions

Table 2. Healthcare Common Procedure Coding System Level II Codes to Report and/or Track CAM Services Performed

CODE	DESCRIPTOR
G0176	Activity therapy such as music, dance, art, or play therapies not for recreation, relate to care and treatment of patient's disabling mental health problems, per session (45 minutes or more)
G0283	Electrical stimulation (unattended), to one or more areas for indication(s) other than wound care, as part of a therapy plan of care
M0075	Cellular therapy (the practice of injecting humans with foreign proteins)
P2031	Hair analysis (excluding arsenic)
S8930	Electrical stimulation of auricular acupuncture points; each 15 minutes of personal one-on-one contact with patient
S8940	Equestrian/hippotherapy, per session
S9449	Weight management classes, nonphysician provider, per session
S9451	Exercise classes, nonphysician provider, per session
S9454	Stress management classes, nonphysician provider, per session
T2036	Therapeutic camping, overnight, waiver; each session
T2037	Therapeutic camping, day, waiver; each session

Table 3. Example of ABC Codes That Add Information to an Existing Procedure Code Descriptor

MEDICAL CODE	DESCRIPTION	ABC CODE	DESCRIPTION
97124	Therapeutic massage	CBBBC	Zero balancing™, 30 minutes
97124	Therapeutic massage	CBEAB	Craniosacral therapy, 15 minutes
97124	Therapeutic massage	CBEAC	Connective tissue massage, 15 minutes

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