

Survey explores medical care for children with autism using complementary alternative medicine

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In a national survey conducted by the University of Minnesota, primary care physicians report that they are more likely to ask patients with autism about complementary alternative medicine (CAM) use and desire more CAM education for this population. The study of 539 U.S. physicians, published this week in Springer's *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, explores the attitudes and practices of primary care physicians caring for children with autism using CAM treatments.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 1 in 150 [children](#) in the U.S. is affected by [autism](#), and one half to three quarters of these children are being treated with complementary [alternative therapies](#). The National Center for Complementary [Alternative Medicine](#) within the National Institutes of Health describes [CAM](#) as, "a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine."

[Physicians](#) in this survey were more likely to ask patients with autism about CAM use compared with children with other chronic conditions. "In light of the high prevalence of CAM used to treat children with autism, it is important that physicians ask about CAM use in the context of routine [primary care](#)," said Allison Golnik, M.D., M.P.H., the study's author and an assistant professor in the University of Minnesota Medical School Department of Pediatrics. While past surveys indicate that physicians desire more [CAM education](#), this survey indicates they desire CAM education specifically for children with autism. "Physicians need access to balanced education that will inform their own recommendations for specific CAM therapies and adequate information to care for families who elect their use," Golnik said.

The study begins to explore physician recommendations when caring for children with autism using CAM. The subset of physicians responding to the survey reported integrating some CAM modalities that may be supported by emerging evidence but need further research. Physician respondents also reported actively discouraging some forms of CAM that have been refuted by evidence or carry significant risks.

For children with autism, the intersection of standard medical therapies, CAM, and the complex [health care system](#) requires a significant level of engagement by the primary care physician. "With the high prevalence of CAM use by children with autism, asking all patients about CAM, establishing an infrastructure to monitor CAM use, and developing CAM education are important goals," Golnik said. "It is important that families be involved in this process."

More information: Golnik AE, Ireland M (2009). Complementary Alternative Medicine for Children with Autism: A Physician Survey. [Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders](#). DOI 10.1007/s10803-009-0714-7

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