

Fact Sheet: Complementary and Alternative Health Care

Complementary and alternative health care (CAHC) may be part of clients 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 indicators 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:

- treatments and practices that are considered CAHC;
- accountabilities when working with clients using or inquiring about CAHC; and
- when CAHC is considered nursing practice.

Complementary and Alternative Health Care

Complementary practices are used alongside conventional health-care while alternative practices are used in place of conventional health-care 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 health-care 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 When Answering Questions or Providing Care to Clients Receiving CAHC

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

- work with their [scope of practice](#)²;
- meet their [standards of practice](#); and
- provide evidence-informed, safe, competent, ethical, and compassionate care to clients.

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 [Practice Guideline: Graduate Nurse Scope of Practice](#).

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 health-care providers in regard to proposed CAHC and share any concerns if CAHC could potentially pose a risk to the client's safety;
- refer to other health-care 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](#).

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

[Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses](#)

[Standards for the Practice of Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioners](#)

[Standards for Documentation](#)

[Standards for Medication Management](#)

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

[Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses](#)

[Fact Sheet: Consent](#)

[Guidelines for Self-Employed Practice](#)

[Use of Professional Title](#)

For further information on CAHC, please contact a Nurse Consultant at practiceconsultation@nanb.nb.ca.

Reference

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

“This content is adapted from the Nova Scotia College of Nursing *Complementary & Alternative Health Care Practice Guideline* (2020) available at <https://www.nscn.ca/>”.