

SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) -- Alternative medicine typically attracts those dissatisfied with conventional medicine or open to trying new treatments. But Americans cite another motivation for using herbal and other non-mainstream health remedies: Cost. Last year (2004), about 6 million Americans turned to complementary and alternative medicine, known as CAM, to treat conditions such as chronic pain and depression because conventional medicine was too pricey, according to a survey released last month from the Center for Studying Health System Change (HSC.) That amounts to 13 percent of the 38 million adults who used some kind of complementary medicine in the last year.

"With health-care costs definitely continuing to outpace inflation and wage growth, more and more people will find conventional medicine unaffordable," HSC health researcher Ha Tu said. "We'll find the 6 million number growing and more people turning to CAM because they see it as an inexpensive alternative." Complementary and alternative medicine encompasses a wide variety of practices including acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy, meditation, chiropractic treatments, massage, and sometimes even prayer. To be sure, those using it to keep costs down weren't the ones most likely to attend weekly yoga classes or massage therapy sessions to enhance their lifestyles. "People who used CAM for specific conditions because of cost concerns tend to look different than other CAM users," Tu said. "They tend to be poorer, less likely to be insured, more likely to have health problems. All in all, they were much more vulnerable." In fact, those using CAM because of cost concerns were four times as likely to be uninsured as those not fazed by price, the study found. They also were twice as likely to have low incomes, defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$36,200 for a family of four in 2002, the study said.

What's more, 20 percent of them didn't have a usual source of medical care, making it likely their health choices were not being monitored, Tu said. The study looked at data from the 2002 National Health Interview Survey, a survey of 31,000 adults and the first of its kind to establish a baseline by asking why patients choose alternative medicine. 'Natural' doesn't equal 'safe' Of those participating in some form of CAM to hold down costs, two-thirds were using herbal remedies. While some of these over-the-counter products may be harmless or even helpful, most of them haven't been proven to work and may interact poorly with other drugs or pose a risk of negative side effects on their own, medical experts said. As the flu season heads toward its traditional February peak, Americans may seek protective alternatives after a national flu-shot shortage limited supplies of flu vaccine. More people also may be looking for pain relief alternatives after Merck pulled Vioxx off the market in September and the Food and Drug Administration warned consumers last month about possible increased heart-attack and stroke risk for those taking naproxen, an agent found in nonprescription drugs like Aleve, especially in higher doses or longer periods than recommended.

On the flu front, a botanical product called Airborne is selling briskly at Walgreen drug stores amid an otherwise slower than usual flu product season, company spokesperson Tiffani Bruce said. But the pick-up may come more from a mention on The Oprah Winfrey show than from the flu-shot shortage, she said. Walgreen, ([WAG: news, chart, profile](#)), which offers a full line of natural, botanical and herbal products, expects sales to rise soon, Bruce said. "We've seen our flu sales be much lower for this December than last year," she said. "We're predicting that's going to pick up in the next month or so. So far the only surge we've seen in that category is Airborne." Some people also turn to echinacea as a preventive measure, but Dr. Paul Glezen, professor of virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, doesn't know of any studies examining the effects of alternative treatments on the influenza virus. Consumers would be wise to learn more about proven remedies such as antiviral drugs, especially those that can treat both strains of flu, he said. "All they're doing is adding to the cost by taking unproven treatments. A lot of the herbal remedies are not inexpensive.... The best thing to do is follow good health rules in terms of eating a balanced diet, avoiding stress and crowds and that will do more to protect against the flu or complications of flu than herbal remedies that are of unproven benefit."

Patients concerned about side effects of prescription drugs need to remember that many of herbal products' side effects are unknown, said Dr. Adrian Dobs, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Baltimore.

So far, it doesn't appear more people are seeking alternative medicine as a result of the flu-shot shortage or concerns about mainstream painkillers, she said.

"I discourage a lot of these over-the-counter dietary supplements," she said. "I ask very extensively of patients what they're taking because a lot of time patients don't tell doctors about it because they're afraid doctors will reprimand them in some way." "There are many side effects of dietary supplements that are not really appreciated. There's very little standardization of dietary supplements in manufacturing," Dobs said, noting advertising on the label may not deliver on its promises. Science may not be perfect, but the rigor involved in clinical trials benefits patients, she said.

"Prescription medications have to be FDA-approved and are extensively studied," Dobs said. "There may be side effects, but they're known side effects. The problem with many over-the-counter botanicals is we don't know the side effects because they haven't been studied extensively in animals or in cell cultures." One of the top concerns is that people in a financial pinch will turn to off-the-shelf remedies such as St. John's wort or kava to treat anxiety or depression conditions that actually get worse without conventional medicine treatments, Tu said. One in eight of all CAM users citing cost concerns used St. John's wort and one in 12 used kava, according to the HSC study. Research has shown St. John's wort can interact dangerously with other drugs and may be ineffective against moderate to severe depression. Kava, used as an anti-anxiety product, has been shown to cause liver damage, HSC said. The danger is that people who substitute unproven remedies for needed medical care to treat a specific condition may cause problems for themselves and the broader health-care system, Tu said. "If people aren't having their medical needs met, they might show up in the emergency room to get treatment when it becomes acute," she said. "They're back in the realm of conventional medicine, but in a very undesirable way in terms of costly treatment of their medical problems."

Where the Benefit Lies

Of course, not all forms of alternative medicine raise doctors' concern. It appears some can raise patients' spirits and help the body. Take acupuncture, for example. A study released last month by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) and the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases found the ancient practice seemed to help patients with knee osteoarthritis relieve pain and restore function. More studies appear to be on the way. NCCAM's estimated funding for 2005 is \$123.1 million, up from \$68.7 million in 2000. Fortunately, most patients don't reject standard therapy that can save their lives or ease their suffering, Dobs said.

Instead they use alternative medicine to bolster their conventional treatments in a growing field known as integrative medicine. About 60 to 70 percent of cancer patients use both, she said. Mind/body interventions such as meditation, tai chi, some exercise programs, acupuncture, chiropractics and massage therapy can be helpful to people, Dobs said. "Not that there's data that it works or helps the underlying disease, but it can help patients feel like they have more control and have a better quality of life while being treated for the underlying disease." Not all alternative measures are devoid of data.

Chondroitin, which purports to give cartilage elasticity and rebuild joints' soft tissue, has shown some benefits in research, and meditation has proven to lower the heart rate, she said. Homeopathy, on the other hand, has been suggested to be ineffective.

A growing market Consumers snapped up about \$54 billion worth of CAM services and dietary supplements in 2003, according to the latest data available from the Nutrition Business Journal, a business newsletter based in San Diego. Of that figure, \$34 billion went to all types of alternative services such as chiropractic, naturopathy, osteopathy and massage therapy, up from \$25.5 billion in 1999, research director Patrick Rea said. This subcategory has been growing 7 percent to 9 percent annually over the last six years. The U.S. market for dietary supplements isn't far behind, generating sales of \$19.8 billion in 2003, up from \$16.5 billion in 1999. This segment has seen more variable growth, ranging between 3.5 percent and 6.5 percent annually since the late 1990s.

The 10 top-selling dietary supplements in 2003, according to Nutrition Business Journal, were: Multivitamins, calcium, non-ephedra-based weight-loss supplements, B vitamins, C vitamins, glucosamine and chondroitin, vitamin E, ephedra-based weight-loss products (the FDA banned sales of ephedra products in late 2003), homeopathic supplements and CoQ10, an anti-aging product.

Patients keen to use herbal products should consult their doctors and try to buy from just one manufacturer instead of jumping around, Dobs said. The bottom line, she said, is: "You shouldn't take anything unless you need it. Exercise and weight loss can do a lot more than half the drugs you take."