Prevalence of use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) by patients/consumers in the UK: systematic review of surveys

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Abstract

This systematic review aimed to estimate the prevalence of use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the UK. Five databases were searched for English language, peer-reviewed surveys published between 1 January 2000 and 7 October 2011. In addition, relevant book chapters and files from our own departmental records were searched by hand. Eighty-nine surveys were included, with a total of 97,222 participants. Most studies were of poor methodological quality. Across surveys on CAM in general, the average one-year prevalence of use of CAM was 41.1% and the average lifetime prevalence was 51.8%. In methodologically sound surveys, the equivalent rates were 26.3% and 44%, respectively. In surveys with response rates >70%, average one-year prevalence was nearly threefold lower than in surveys with response rates between 21% and 50%. Herbal medicine was the most popular CAM, followed by homeopathy, aromatherapy, massage and reflexology. Many patients and consumers in the UK use CAM; healthcare professionals should therefore responsibly advise their patients about the use of CAM.

Key Words

complementary and alternative medicine, survey, systematic review

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The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is increasing. The most common reported reason for CAM use is dissatisfaction with conventional healthcare. Several studies have reported factors influencing CAM usage and beliefs in the general public but the beliefs of healthcare staff are less well known. This paper reports the results of an online survey of 537 healthcare staff. In the UK, the average lifetime prevalence of CAM use is over 50%, with herbal medicine the most popular, followed by homeopathy, aromatherapy, massage and reflexology [1]. Being female, younger (aged <65 years) [2] and having a chronic condition [3] are associated CAM use. The most common reported reason for use of CAM is dissatisfaction with conventional healthcare [4]. The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) by children and adolescents is something that all health professionals involved in their care need to be aware of. CAM can be defined as, "diagnosis, treatment and/or prevention which complements mainstream medicine by contributing to a common whole, by satisfying a demand not met by orthodoxy, or by diversifying the conceptual frameworks of medicine" [1]. Prevalence studies. The prevalence of CAM use were very similar in the inpatients and the four different outpatient groups, except for being possibly slightly higher in the respiratory group (49%). Table 1. 1-year Prevalence of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Use. Group Prevalence (%).