What Is Naturopathic Medicine and How Did It Develop?

Naturopathic medicine is a holistic, whole body health care system based on the belief that the body has the potential to heal itself and that the physician’s role is to support the body’s efforts.1,2 The founder of naturopathy in America has been attributed to Dr. Benedict Lust (1872–1945), a German immigrant.3 He described naturopathy as a system of returning to nature to cure diseases by drinking clean water, getting air and sunlight, by exercising, getting rest and eating a proper diet. Dr. Lust also believed that naturopathy should be a natural therapy used to educate people to live healthier lives and not as a means for treatment for disease.3 Currently, however, naturopathic medicine employs multidisciplinary means of preventing and treating disease.

Historical Development

### The philosophical roots of naturopathic medicine stem from the time of Hippocrates, the Greek father of medicine (about 400 BCE).4 Hippocrates incorporated natural means such as diet, exercise, manipulative therapies, and hydrotherapy into his practice.5 At that time, other physicians also studied the laws of  What Is Naturopathic Medicine and How Did It Develop?

[**Naturopathic medicine**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key20) is a holistic, whole body health care system based on the belief that the body has the potential to heal itself and that the physician’s role is to support the body’s efforts.[**1**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib1),[**2**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib2) The founder of naturopathy in America has been attributed to Dr. Benedict Lust (1872–1945), a German immigrant.[**3**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib3) He described naturopathy as a system of returning to nature to cure diseases by drinking clean water, getting air and sunlight, by exercising, getting rest and eating a proper diet. Dr. Lust also believed that naturopathy should be a natural therapy used to educate people to live healthier lives and not as a means for treatment for disease.[**3**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib3) Currently, however, naturopathic medicine employs multidisciplinary means of preventing and treating disease.

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The philosophical roots of naturopathic medicine stem from the time of Hippocrates, the Greek father of medicine (about 400 BCE).[**4**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib4) Hippocrates incorporated natural means such as diet, exercise, manipulative therapies, and [**hydrotherapy**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key13) into his practice.[**5**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib5) At that time, other physicians also studied the laws of nature and applied those principles within their medical practices. *Vis medicatrix naturae*, Latin for the healing power of nature, was their code and became the mantra for present-day naturopathic medicine. The practice of naturopathy began as a part of the European nature cure, which evolved during the 18th and 19th centuries.[**6**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib6) Six [**cholera**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key6) [**epidemics**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key10) occurred during the 19th century in Asia, Europe, North Africa, and the Americas. Paris and London were affected especially hard, with thousands of deaths. In 1842, Chadwick submitted a *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Laboring Population of Great Britain* to the English Parliament.[**7**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib7) In it, Chadwick wrote that the spread of cholera was due to contaminated drinking water from human sewage. Chadwick did not accept germ theory as the cause of cholera. He believed that filth that could be seen by the eyes and smelled by the nose was the main cause of pandemic disease. His solution was to change the urban sanitation **[infrastructure](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml" \l "c10-key14)**by incorporating garbage collection, toilets with flushing mechanisms, and enclosed sewage systems, therein assuring cleaner drinking water.

In 1848, Arnold Rikli, who was born in Sweden but lived most of his life in Bled, Slovenia, also advocated for the importance of fresh air, sunlight, and swimming in cold water (water cure) in order to cure diseases and remain healthy.[**7**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib7) He believed that suntanning and walking were also important for health. In sum, rather than scientific medicines, changing the environment (nature) was believed to be the *real* cure for diseases by these early pioneers of natural healing methods.

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What Are the Naturopathic Treatments?

Balancing Four Major Body Systems

Naturopaths employ a system of noninvasive health care and health assessment in which neither surgery nor drugs are the first treatment of choice, although they know that there are times and certain body conditions that require them.30 Naturopaths believe that the key to successful treatment is in balancing four major body systems: the immune system, the elimination (or detoxification) system, the nervous system, and the hormonal system.10 In order to achieve this balance, naturopaths encourage patients to use natural therapies such as fresh air, sunlight, water, rest, natural medicines and herbs, and exercise.10,31

Education and Counseling

Naturopaths rely on educating and counseling clients about lifestyle and diet. In fact, at Bastyr University in Seattle, a major hub for educating naturopaths, students take counseling courses so that they can better work with clients.

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**Nutrition**

Nutrition and its relationship to diseases is a primary focus of naturopathy. Naturopaths believe that diet alone or with the use of proper supplements may improve conditions. [**Fasting**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key11) may be prescribed for a day or more (1-, 3-, 5-, and 7-day fasts). The purpose is to give the digestive system a rest and to detoxify the body. Juice may be drunk or grapes may be eaten during days of fasting.[**5**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib5)

**Botanicals and Traditional Medicines**

Medicines prescribed usually come from nature rather than a laboratory. Naturopaths use botanical medicine ([**phytotherapy**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#c10-key24)) for treating disease conditions. Vitamins and homeopathic substances (e.g., tissue cell salts) may also be prescribed. Different states have laws identifying the type of traditional medicines that naturopaths may prescribe. In the state of Washington, for example, naturopaths may prescribe antibiotics, thyroid medicine, progesterone, and other drugs.[**10**](https://ereader-web-viewer.chegg.com/19_chapter10_18.xhtml#ch10-bib10)

Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy and colonic enemas (colon hydrotherapy) may be used, depending on the condition. Hydrotherapy is the treatment of physical disability, injury, or illness by immersion of all or part of the body in water to facilitate movement, promote wound healing, and relieve pain. It is usually done under the supervision of a trained therapist. Hydrotherapy may include the use of hot and cold water. Alternate hot and cold is used to stimulate the blood and lymph circulation and help to remove congestion and revive the body tissues.5 Cold compresses may also be used to boost the elimination of toxins.

As described, naturopathic treatments are usually noninvasive and medicines are natural or herbal rather than prescription drugs. Naturopaths focus on the importance of nutrition and lifestyle not only as strategies for the prevention of disease, but also as treatment modalities.

You have now learned what naturopathy is, the diagnostic methods used, and an overview of treatment modalities. Next, we explain the training of the naturopathic physician.

Naturopaths have shown good success in treating some cancers because of the naturopathic treatments that focus on strengthening the body’s immune system.10 The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) is studying a naturopathic dietary approach for type 2 diabetes, naturopathic treatments for periodontal gum disease (periodontitis), and naturopathic herbal and dietary approaches to breast cancer prevention; currently, however, there are no study results. Another NCCIH study on naturopathic techniques to help a group of 70 warehouse workers who had lower back pain demonstrated positive results. Naturopathic care that included acupuncture, exercise, dietary advice, relaxation training, and a back care booklet was more cost effective than the employer’s usual patient education program. Both workers and employers benefited from the naturopathic approach, which was associated with less absenteeism, lower costs for treatments, and better quality of life.9

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What Are the Results of Research on Naturopathy?

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IN THE NEWS

Article Presented at The Health Site, March 10, 2015

Naturopathic physicians believe in helping cancer patients cope with their illness in a more holistic and natural way. In an interview with Dr. Anjali Sharma, he explains some of those ways. Strict daily routine includes:

Yoga

Pranayama (breathing exercises)

Relaxation

Meditation

Rehabilitative exercises

Psychospiritual counseling

Hydrotherapy

Magnetotherapy

Heliotherapy (light or sun therapy)

Massage therapy

Acupressure and acupuncture

What are your thoughts about these recommendations?

Source: Sampath S. How to cope with cancer the naturopathy way. The Health Site. March 10, 2015. Available at: http://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases-conditions/cancer-naturopathy-treatment-p214/. Accessed April 17, 2018.

The NCCIH9 has reported that both naturopathy and traditional Chinese medicine were effective for treating temporomandibular disorders (TMD) in women. TMD is characterized by pain and tenderness when chewing and opening the mouth. Limitations of jaw opening are often accompanied by deviations in mandible path and clicking, popping, or grating sounds from the temporomandibular joint. Researchers evaluated two alternative healing approaches—traditional Chinese medicine (n = 50) and naturopathic medicine (n = 50)—to assess whether they were as effective as usual care (n = 50) provided by dental clinicians. Participants were females 25–55 years of age with multiple health problems.9

Two studies published in the 1990s showed positive results for naturopathic treatment of rheumatoid arthritis using a naturopathic-controlled diet.36,37 Many other studies cited by Pelletier10 were published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and showed fairly positive results for naturopathic treatment. One series of studies by Hudson showed the value of naturopathic botanicals and nutritional supplements that changed abnormal pap smears to normal. Also, a pilot study conducted at Bastyr University provided herbal and nutritional therapies to HIV-infected patients, which improved their immune function. Pelletier also presented studies showing the effects of naturopathic treatment on osteoarthritis, asthma, atherosclerosis, back pain, benign prostatic hypertrophy, depression, diabetes mellitus, eczema, HIV disease, irritable bowel syndrome, migraine headaches, middle ear infections, premenstrual syndrome, upper respiratory infection, and vaginitis. Refer to Pelletier’s text,10 The Best Alternative Medicine: What Works? What Does Not?, pages 184–194, for a closer examination of these results.

What Steps Are Used When Prescribing Homeopathic Treatments?

Homeopaths use five essential steps to prescribe a remedy: note the symptoms; look up the symptoms; decide which remedy is appropriate; decide the dosage, and how often and when to repeat it; and evaluate the results. The dosage is dependent on the severity of symptoms, but the rule in homeopathy is that the minimum dosage required to initiate a healing response is first given. An important principle of homeopathy is that the whole person should be studied—their temperament, personality, and emotional and physical responses—before prescribing a homeopathic remedy. A person’s genetic and personal health history and body type are also considerations when prescribing a homeopathic remedy.