

Alternative Medicine and Its Growing Popularity in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Alternative medicine and the broader field of traditional, complementary, and integrative medicine (TCIM) have become increasingly visible in contemporary healthcare. People may seek such approaches because of cultural traditions, perceived holistic benefits, personal experiences, accessibility, affordability, dissatisfaction with aspects of conventional care, or a desire for greater participation in health decisions. WHO reports that TCIM is used in 170 countries and that many countries are developing policies, regulation, research, and integration frameworks. A 2025 umbrella review identified perceived usefulness as an important driver of TCIM use, while emphasizing the need for safe, effective, and ethical integration. At the same time, popularity should not be equated with clinical effectiveness. Evidence differs substantially across practices, and some approaches have stronger evidence than others. WHO's Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034 emphasizes evidence, safety, regulation, qualified practitioners, and culturally respectful integration. This paper examines the growing popularity of alternative medicine through patient preferences, cultural influences, accessibility, wellness trends, digital communication, evidence, safety, regulation, and future healthcare integration.

Keywords

Alternative Medicine; Complementary Medicine; Traditional Medicine; Integrative Healthcare; Patient Preferences; Holistic Health; Health Behaviour; Wellness; Evidence-Based Healthcare

Introduction

The boundaries between conventional, complementary, alternative, and integrative healthcare have become increasingly visible in contemporary society. WHO distinguishes complementary medicine as additional healthcare practices outside mainstream medicine, while integrative medicine combines biomedical and traditional or complementary knowledge in an evidence-based approach.

TCIM is not a marginal global phenomenon. WHO reports that it is used in 170 countries, while its recent global survey found substantial use across many populations. WHO also notes that traditional and complementary practices can be particularly important where they are culturally acceptable, accessible, and affordable.

The growing popularity of these approaches is influenced by several factors. Patients may value personalized care, holistic approaches, self-care, cultural familiarity, or perceived usefulness. A 2025 umbrella review examining determinants of TCIM use identified perceived usefulness as a major factor influencing uptake across different populations and practices.

However, the term alternative medicine covers a wide range of practices, including herbal medicine, acupuncture, yoga, meditation, massage, traditional medical systems, and other approaches. Their evidence bases, risks, and regulatory status differ considerably. Therefore, broad claims about alternative medicine as a single category are inappropriate. This paper examines nine dimensions of the growing popularity of alternative medicine: patient preferences, holistic health, cultural traditions, accessibility, wellness trends, digital influence, evidence, safety, and responsible integration.

1. Changing Patient Preferences and Healthcare Choices

Modern healthcare increasingly emphasizes patient participation and shared decision-making. Some individuals seek alternative or complementary practices because they want greater control over their health choices or prefer approaches that address physical, psychological, social, and lifestyle dimensions together. WHO reports that demand for TCIM is growing and links this partly to patients seeking greater agency and more holistic and personalized care. Patient preference is important, but healthcare choices should also consider evidence, risks, costs, and whether effective conventional treatment is available.

2. The Appeal of Holistic and Personalized Care

One reason alternative medicine attracts attention is its emphasis on the individual as a whole rather than focusing exclusively on a single symptom or disease. Consultations may explore lifestyle, emotions, sleep, diet, stress, social circumstances, and personal experiences. The 2025 umbrella review found perceived usefulness to be a major factor associated with TCIM use. The popularity of holistic care also reflects broader interest in prevention, wellness, stress management, and self-care. These goals can be valuable even when evidence for a particular therapy remains uncertain.

3. Cultural Traditions and Social Acceptance

Many complementary and traditional practices are rooted in longstanding cultural traditions. Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, yoga, herbal practices, indigenous healing systems, and other approaches may be embedded within families and communities. WHO emphasizes that traditional medicine has developed within diverse historical and cultural contexts and remains an important healthcare resource in many regions. Cultural acceptance can increase trust and accessibility, but cultural familiarity should not be treated as evidence that every practice is clinically effective.

4. Accessibility, Affordability, and Health-System Gaps

Alternative medicine may be attractive where conventional healthcare is difficult to access because of cost, distance, waiting times, or limited availability. WHO notes that traditional medicine can remain a first choice for some populations because it is culturally acceptable, available, and affordable. Accessibility can therefore influence healthcare behaviour independently of beliefs about efficacy. At the same time, policymakers should address underlying gaps in healthcare access rather than assuming that alternative medicine can replace essential medical services.

5. Wellness Culture and Preventive Health Behaviour

Contemporary wellness culture has expanded interest in practices such as yoga, meditation, massage, nutrition-based approaches, and mind-body activities. These practices are often used for stress reduction, relaxation, fitness, sleep, and general well-being rather than treatment of a specific disease. Some complementary approaches have evidence supporting selected health outcomes. NCCIH, for example, notes that certain approaches such as acupuncture, mindfulness meditation, massage, tai chi, qigong, and yoga may help manage some chronic pain conditions. The evidence must be assessed practice by practice and condition by condition.

6. Social Media, Digital Platforms, and Information Exposure

Digital platforms have changed how people discover and evaluate alternative health practices. Social media, video platforms, blogs, wellness applications, online communities, and influencer content can make information widely available. The same accessibility can create challenges because online health information may mix scientific evidence, personal testimonials, commercial marketing, and unsupported claims. NCCIH's Know the Science initiative emphasizes the importance of evaluating scientific information, placebo effects, risks, and medication-product interactions. Digital health literacy is therefore increasingly important when people consider alternative medicine.

7. Evidence, Scientific Evaluation, and Public Trust

Growing popularity creates a need for stronger scientific evaluation. Different practices require appropriate study designs, meaningful health outcomes, transparent reporting, and consideration of both benefits and harms. WHO's 2025 Global Traditional Medicine Strategy emphasizes building an evidence base, improving regulation and quality, ensuring qualified practitioners, and developing appropriate integration models. Popularity, patient satisfaction, or historical use cannot independently establish clinical effectiveness. Evidence should be assessed separately for each intervention and health condition.

8. Safety, Regulation, and Responsible Use

Alternative medicine is not automatically safe because it is described as natural or traditional. Risks depend on the specific practice, product, preparation, dose, practitioner,

and individual health circumstances. NCCIH advises people to tell their healthcare providers about all complementary approaches they use and warns against replacing proven conventional treatment with an approach that has not been shown to be safe and effective. WHO likewise emphasizes regulation, quality, safety, qualified practitioners, and evidence-based integration.

9. Future of Alternative Medicine in Contemporary Healthcare

The future of alternative medicine is increasingly connected with evidence-based integrative healthcare rather than a simple opposition between alternative and conventional systems. WHO's 2025–2034 strategy aims to support people-centred TCIM while strengthening evidence, safety, regulation, and appropriate integration. Future healthcare may increasingly use selected traditional and complementary practices alongside biomedical care when evidence supports their safety and usefulness. Research priorities identified through international consensus also emphasize safety, effectiveness, integration, and governance. The central challenge will be to preserve cultural knowledge and patient choice while ensuring that healthcare remains scientifically responsible, transparent, equitable, and safe.

Illustration

The following illustration presents the growing popularity of alternative medicine as an interaction between patient preferences, holistic well-being, cultural accessibility, and evidence and safety.

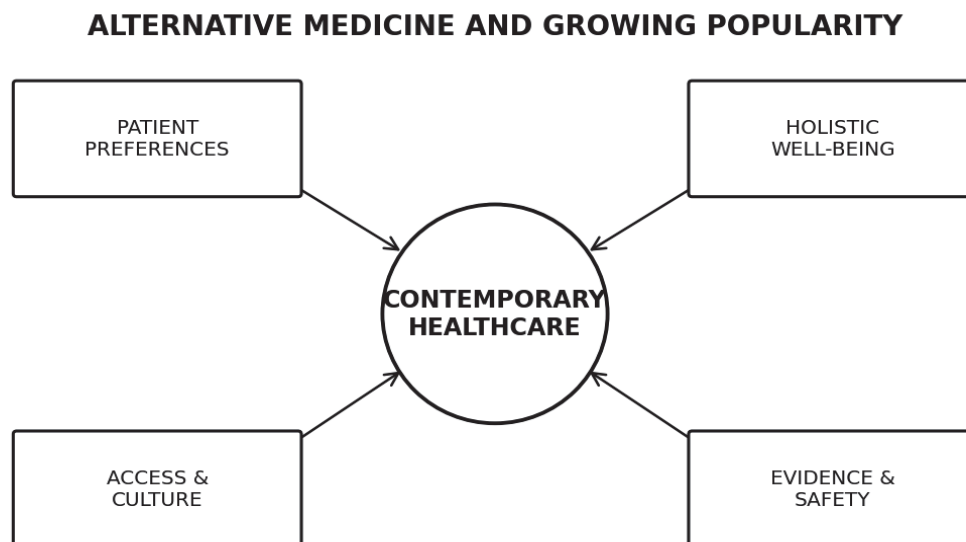


Figure 1. Alternative medicine and its growing role in contemporary healthcare.

Conclusion

Alternative medicine has gained visibility in contemporary society because it responds to several important healthcare preferences, including interest in personalized care, holistic well-being, cultural familiarity, self-care, accessibility, and greater participation in health decisions. WHO's recent global reporting confirms that traditional, complementary, and integrative medicine is widely used internationally. However, alternative medicine is not a single category and its individual practices differ greatly in evidence and safety. Growing popularity should therefore be accompanied by stronger research, responsible communication, quality standards, practitioner regulation, and informed patient choice. The future is likely to involve greater interest in evidence-based integrative healthcare, where selected complementary practices can be considered alongside conventional medicine when supported by appropriate evidence. Such an approach can respect cultural traditions and patient preferences while maintaining the fundamental principles of safety, effectiveness, transparency, and quality healthcare.

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