

Alternative Medicine Used by Women

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Abstract:- There has been growing interest in alternative medicine (AM) use over the last few decades due to the widespread desire for holistic, individualized care and dissatisfaction with the conventional healthcare system. This literature review examines the prevalence, reasons for use, modalities, and potential benefits and risks of AM practices utilized by women. From various clinical trials, surveys, and ethnographic researches, this review will attempt to draw a comprehensive understanding of the integration of alternative therapies into the health care practice of women. In addition, this article discusses the effectiveness of herbal medicine, acupuncture, chiropractic, homeopathy, and mind-body therapies by analyzing scientific evidence. The results indicate that although some AM practices are quite useful, issues of effectiveness, safety, and integration with conventional medicine remain.

Keywords:- *Alternative Medicine, Women's Health, Herbal Medicine, Acupuncture, Homeopathy, Mind-Body Therapies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "alternative medicine" describes health practices, treatments, and therapies that are not part of the conventional or Western medical model. Over the years, alternative medicine has gained popularity as a complementary or substitute approach to health management. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, CAM is used more by populations who want natural, non-invasive, and holistic treatments. Women are also the most active adopters of AM, which is influenced by various aspects unique to women's health, among them, reproductive health, hormonal imbalances, pregnancy-related complaints, chronic cases, and mental health.

This review article comprehensively describes the AM practice by women: it refers to prevalence rates, why women started with alternative practices, common modalities in their usage, and evidence base that support them. Further, this literature review underscores the risks and benefits associated with these alternatives and therapies for women.

II. PREVALENCE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE USE AMONG WOMEN

Research has indicated that women are more inclined towards alternative therapies than men. There are several large-scale surveys and studies that have documented the high prevalence of use of AM among women. Eisenberg et al. (1998) have reported that almost 40% of women in the United States reported using some form of CAM in the past year, a number greater than the 30% of men who used these therapies. This has been the case for many countries, including Europe and Australia. The proportion of users who are women is commonly larger than among men.

Women are reported to have used complementary therapies such as acupuncture, herbal supplements, and yoga more than men according to the NCCIH 2019. In addition, women also make more use of a greater range of AM practices: natural remedies for reproductive health; mind-body practices to control stress and mental well-being.

There are various reasons that contribute to women's increased interest and involvement with AM, such as the fact that they are more frequent users of medical services, their many roles as care-providers, and their perceptions that AM is less invasive than conventional forms of treatment.

III. REASONS FOR THE USE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE BY WOMEN

There are several key reasons why women are particularly inclined to adopt alternative medicine. These reasons can be categorized into personal, social, and cultural factors:

A. Holistic and Personalized Care

One of the most important reasons women visit AM is the promise of holistic and personalized care. Unlike conventional medicine, which typically addresses symptoms and pharmaceutical intervention, many of the AM practices treat the entire body, mind, and spirit. Holistic approaches particularly appeal to women, especially because they provide a better and more comprehensive understanding of health factors, including emotional, psychological, and social considerations besides merely physical symptoms (Fouladbakhsh & Stommel, 2008).

B. *Dissatisfaction with Mainstream Healthcare*

A main reason for women to seek AM is a general feeling of discontent with mainstream healthcare. In many cases, women perceive their health problems not to be sufficiently dealt with by mainstream healthcare. Many women, who are suffering from chronic illnesses like fibromyalgia, IBS, or CFS, report feeling that mainstream treatment has been insufficient. As a result, they may try alternative remedies like acupuncture or herbal medicines, hoping to better regulate their symptoms (MacLennan et al., 2002).

C. *Chronic and Reproductive Health Conditions*

Many women use AM to control chronic health conditions, including menstrual irregularities, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), menopause symptoms, and fertility problems. Many of these issues are managed using AM therapies such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, and yoga. For instance, herbal remedies for menstrual cramps and acupuncture for improving fertility have become popular because they are perceived to be effective and safe (Cramer et al., 2013).

D. *Psychosocial and Cultural Factors*

Women's health choices are significantly influenced by their social networks, cultural values, and family dynamics. Peer influence, media portrayals of alternative therapies, and recommendation by friends or family plays an important role in shaping a woman's decision to seek AM. It has been observed that women belonging to Western countries have been going for alternative therapies more in the context of a cultural move toward natural and preventive health practices (Harris et al., 2004).

E. *Desire for Control and Empowerment*

Another reason for using AM is the desire to have more control over one's health. Women are often socialized to be active family and caregiving participants, which may give them a greater desire to control their own health. Many women report that they feel empowered when using AM, because many of these practices focus on personal responsibility and proactive health management (Ernst, 2009).

IV. COMMON ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE MODALITIES USED BY WOMEN

Women use a variety of alternative medicine modalities, which depend on their health needs, preferences, and cultural influences. The following sections review some of the most commonly used AM practices:

A. *Herbal Medicine*

Herbal medicine is one of the most widely used forms of alternative therapy among women, particularly for managing reproductive health concerns, menopausal symptoms, and chronic conditions. Herbs like black cohosh, evening primrose

oil, chaste tree berry (Vitex), and red clover are commonly used to manage symptoms of menopause, PMS, and hormonal imbalances.

A meta-analysis by McKenna et al. (2001) found that black cohosh was particularly effective in reducing hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms. However, despite the popularity of herbal remedies, the scientific evidence supporting their efficacy is mixed, and concerns about safety, dosage, and quality control persist. Women should be cautious when using herbal remedies, especially when combined with pharmaceutical treatments.

B. *Acupuncture*

A fine-point needle is inserted into specific areas of the body to activate energy flow in the traditional art of Chinese medicine. Acupuncture has widely been used among women who apply for its treatment with chronic pain, anxiety, depression, infertility, and menstrual abnormalities.

Many studies have demonstrated that acupuncture is helpful in the management of conditions such as chronic pain, menstrual cramps, and even anxiety. A meta-analysis by Vickers et al. (2012) revealed that acupuncture significantly alleviated pain in patients with osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia. Moreover, it has also been applied as a treatment for infertility, where some research has shown it to possibly increase the success rate of IVF.

C. *Chiropractic Care*

Chiropractic care focuses on the manipulation of the spine and musculoskeletal system to alleviate pain and improve function. It is commonly used by women for musculoskeletal issues, including lower back pain, neck pain, and headaches.

Chiropractic treatment has been found to be useful in alleviating certain kinds of pain. Chiropractic spinal manipulation is proven to be effective for back pain and headaches, but evidence for other conditions is less robust, as per the systematic review of van Tulder et al. (2000).

D. *Homeopathy*

Homeopathy is the use of highly diluted substances to treat various ailments, based on the principle of "like cures like." Although widely used, homeopathy remains controversial and many studies fail to show strong evidence for its effectiveness.

A large review by Shang et al. (2005) concluded that there was no statistically significant clinical effect beyond placebo of homeopathy. However, most women reported using homeopathy for anxiety, premenstrual syndrome, and chronic conditions because it is personalized and has minimal side effects.

E. Mind-Body Therapies

Mind-body therapies such as yoga, meditation, and MBSR seem to be liked most among females. These therapies are based on the mind-body interaction approach and are utilized to cope with stress, reduce symptoms of anxiety, promote healthy mental functioning, and manage chronic pain.

Research continuously gives support to the advantages brought by mind-body therapies. A review by Cramer et al. (2013) has suggested that yoga significantly decreases symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in women. MBSR has been proved helpful in improving well-being and lowering pain in women suffering from fibromyalgia and breast cancer.

F. Benefits and Risks of Alternative Medicine for Women

Many women with AM report significant benefits from these therapies. However, the risks and limitations associated with such therapies need also to be considered.

V. BENEFITS

- **Personalized Approach:** AM offers a more personalized approach to health, where women can explore treatments for her unique needs and concerns.
- **Fewer Side Effects:** In contrast to traditional pharmaceutical drugs, most people believe that AM treatments, including acupuncture, yoga, and herbal supplements, are less likely to have as many or more severe side effects.
- **Empowerment:** Women often find that using AM helps them feel more empowered over their health, which fits with their need for more control and a greater sense of involvement in the healing

There is diversity among women's reasons for selecting alternative medicine, which features themes such as seeking holistic care, the management of chronic diseases and reproductive health problems. The findings of Lewith et al., 2002 published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* reveal that women diagnosed with chronic illnesses like fibromyalgia and irritable bowel syndrome are highly likely to use alternative medicine than women without chronic illnesses. Another *Journal of Women's Health* study concluded that reproductive health issues, like infertility and irregular menstruations, increased the susceptibility to alternative medicine use compared to those women who had no reproductive health issues (Domar et al., 2011).

A. Alternative Medicine Use Outcomes:

Though alternative medicine could sometimes offer relief for symptoms and improvements in quality of life, others indicated that it remains open for further research on its safety and efficacy. For instance, the systematic review of acupuncture for menstrual cramps concluded that the patients

who underwent acupuncture reported having significant reductions in pain intensity as well as improved quality of life (Witt et al., 2006). However, reviewing herbal supplements for the symptoms of menopause revealed that a huge amount of evidence regarding their efficacy was flawed and inconclusive (Liu et al., 2014).

B. Regulation and Ethics of Alternative Medicine of Women

The increased utilization of alternative medicine (AM) by women has been associated with a host of regulatory and ethical issues. While there are several perceived benefits associated with AM, the absence of standardized regulations, quality control, and clear ethical guidelines may lead to safety, efficacy, and accessibility concerns about AM. Regulation and ethical considerations are very crucial in ensuring that AM practices are safe, evidence-based, and beneficial for women.

This section discusses the most important regulatory and ethical challenges surrounding AM, focusing on the specific concerns that affect women, including the quality and safety of treatments, informed consent, equity of access, and the integration of AM into conventional healthcare settings.

VI. REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

A. Lack of Standardized Regulations and Quality Control

This lack of standard regulations for alternative medicine proves to be one of its biggest barriers. With conventional medicine coming under rigidly regulated domains of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and other such authorities, many Alternative Medicine practices and products such as herbal supplements, homeopathic remedies, or acupuncture cannot find an equivalent yardstick under the same sort of control. It poses immense risks for the patients particularly women in large numbers since they prefer using such therapies.

- **Herbal Supplements and Dietary Products:** In many countries, herbal supplements are considered to be dietary supplements, most of which escape the stern clinical trials and safety examination that pharmaceutical drugs undergo. According to the FDA, for instance, prior to entering the U.S. market, these products are not evaluated for efficacy. Recently, a report by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) discovered that many herbal products contain contamination with heavy metals, pesticides, and other harmful products, which may be specially dangerous to pregnant women and those who have some medical history (NIH, 2020). In addition, unregulated products may have variable dosages and quality, which can lead to an impact on the products' efficacy and safety.
- **Homeopathy and Lack of Scientific Validation:** Homeopathic remedies are often marketed without clear evidence of their effectiveness. The practice is not subject to the same clinical trial requirements as conventional medications, which means that homeopathy, while widely used, remains controversial. Studies such as the one by

Shang et al. (2005) have questioned the efficacy of homeopathic treatments, but they continue to be available due to gaps in regulation.

- **Acupuncture and Safety:** Acupuncture is generally safe if administered by qualified professionals. However, there are concerns about the training and credentialing of practitioners. Many regions do not have a centralized regulatory body that oversees acupuncture practitioners, resulting in wide variation in training standards and practitioner competency. Poor hygiene and improper needle use can lead to serious complications, such as infections or injuries.

B. Regulation of Practitioners and Credentials

The professional regulation of alternative medicine professionals differs significantly by country and type of therapy. For example, in some regions, providers must complete formal education, get certification, or obtain licensure before commencing practice; whereas others operate with minimal supervision.

- **Education and Certification:** In most countries, alternative medicine professionals, for instance, herbalists, acupuncturists, or homeopaths do not have to undergo professional education or standardized certification. While there are voluntary organizations that offer accreditation (e.g., the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in the U.S.), the lack of universal, legally binding certifications leads to inconsistent practices and varying levels of competence. This raises significant ethical concerns, especially when the health and safety of women are at stake.
- **Scope of Practice:** There is also the scope of practice for alternative medicine practitioners. Many women seek AM to address problems that are far more complicated, such as fertility, chronic pain, or mental health issues. Without enough regulation, some practitioners may engage in practice outside their area of knowledge, which could lead to harm or a missed diagnosis.

C. Ethical Oversight in Clinical Trials and Research

Quality of research in the area of alternative medicine has been discussed in large debates. Ethical concerns arise in the case when AM practices or treatments are tested not following good clinical trial design, proper placebo control, appropriate sample size, and ethical recruitment practices.

- **Informed Consent:** For women taking part in clinical trials exploring alternative therapies, informed consent is an essential ethical consideration. Many AM practices are not well understood or researched, so women could be exposed to risks without knowing the full extent of the efficacy or safety of the treatment. Ethical guidelines suggest that clear communication regarding the risks and benefits of participating in AM research should be made and full transparency about the unproven nature of certain therapies.

- **Placebo Effect and Blinding:** AM trials are often not able to sustain the rigor of traditional clinical trials. For instance, in certain types of AM research, it is hard to create a placebo treatment, such as in acupuncture studies, where participants know whether they are receiving "real" acupuncture or a placebo. Ethical concerns arise when trial results are skewed by the placebo effect or lack of blinding, potentially leading to the premature marketing of ineffective treatments.

VII. ETHICAL ISSUES

A. Informed Consent and Autonomy

One of the key principles of healthcare ethics is patient autonomy, that is, full information for making decisions related to health. For women who decide on alternative medicine, informed consent is an especially important issue since many AM practices have varied levels of evidence to support them.

- **Transparency of Information:** Women seeking AM treatments may not always receive balanced, accurate, and scientifically validated information. AM practitioners may, either intentionally or unintentionally, exaggerate the benefits of their treatments or downplay potential risks. Women who lack access to credible, evidence-based information are particularly vulnerable to making ill-informed decisions, which could have long-term health consequences.
- **Empowerment vs. Exploitation:** While alternative medicine can empower women by providing more choices in their healthcare, there is also the potential for exploitation. In cases where AM practitioners promise "cures" for conditions like infertility, cancer, or chronic pain without scientific backing, women may be exploited emotionally and financially. Informed consent must ensure that women are made aware of the limitations and unproven aspects of AM therapies.

B. Equity of Access and Affordability

Access to alternative medicine is often a matter of socio-economic status and geographical location. While some women can access trained practitioners and variety of therapies, others might find such treatments prohibitively expensive or geographically inaccessible.

- **Cost Barriers:** While AM treatments like acupuncture or naturopathy are costly and not generally covered by most insurance packages, many low-income women or the uninsured would face an equity issue when access to treatment that might be helpful would be further limited by cost factors. Such a situation becomes most challenging with women in disadvantaged populations who face systemic health disadvantage to start with.
- **Cultural and Geographic Access:** Due to cultural acceptance or the availability of local practitioners, women in certain parts of the world may have easier access to AM treatments. However, in other regions, particularly those

where AM is not widely practiced or regulated, women face challenges in accessing well-trained practitioners. Regulatory bodies can help standardize and make these safe and effective treatments accessible to all, bringing it closer to women, irrespective of geographic location or socio-economic status.

C. Cultural Sensitivity and Gender Considerations

Gender-specific needs in women's health render practices appropriate to these needs a prerequisite in AM. Ethical practice in AM involves cultural values, roles of genders, and the specific health challenges that women face, especially in areas like fertility, menopause, and mental health.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Some AM therapies, such as traditional herbal medicine or acupuncture, are based on cultural practices that may be unfamiliar or misunderstood by practitioners outside the culture of origin. Ethical AM practice requires cultural competence and sensitivity so that women from diverse backgrounds can feel respected and supported in their health choices.
- **Treatments for females:** Many AM practices target issues specific to the female health. Again, though, such practices should be evidence-based to avoid the perpetuation of gender stereotypes or prejudiced perceptions toward women's health. For example, treatments targeting menstrual issues, menopause, or weight loss and are marketed toward women need to be supported by credible evidence to prove their efficacy.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This trend in AM usage among women is reflective of a rising demand for holistic, individualized, and non-invasive approaches to health care. The adoption of AM practices by women is most dominant in the usage of herbal remedies, acupuncture, chiropractic care, homeopathy, and mind-body therapies to treat a variety of health problems, such as those related to reproductive health, chronic pain, mental health, and menopause. The attraction of AM is in the possibility to provide more individualized care, fewer side effects compared with traditional treatments, and greater empowerment to control one's health.

However, mass application of AM poses some major problems in the aspects of safety, efficacy, and regulation. The other issue is that most alternative therapies are not standardized, nor regulated in terms of quality control; therefore, the quality and safety of treatment can vary widely. Moreover, most practitioners are not uniformly accredited or certified, and even less so in such fields as herbal medicine or homeopathy, which creates critical ethical questions about the competency and preparation of those providing the service. Moreover, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of many AM practices is often inconclusive or insufficient, leaving women vulnerable to treatments that may not deliver the expected benefits or, worse, pose health risks.

Ethically, the use of AM presents a number of critical issues such as informed consent, availability of reliable information, and the danger of exploitation. Women must be furnished with transparent, evidence-based information on the risks and benefits of alternative therapies so that they can make informed healthcare decisions. In addition, the economic and geographic accessibility of AM remains a barrier for many women, particularly those from marginalized communities, which could worsen health disparities.

At its bottom line, while AM can certainly open important avenues for women's health and wellness, it is highly imperative that these therapies must undergo rigorous research, strict regulatory frameworks, and the moral sense of ethics. As this trend of integrating alternative medicine with mainstream healthcare systems can facilitate holistic, patient-centered care, it is essential to have a balance between upholding choice and ensuring patient safety. The future of AM in women's health care will entail a cooperative approach from both conventional medical professionals and practitioners of AM, as well as from regulatory bodies and patients, to foster evidence-based practices, ethical standards, and informed decision-making.

Alternatively, better working infrastructure in the regulation arena, with improved scientific research on the efficacy of alternative medicine, and greater access for all women to safe and effective treatments will be realized fully to tap the potential of alternative medicine. Once such efforts are taken, alternative medicine may become a beneficial and integral part of women's healthcare, supplementing Western medical practices while emphasizing women's well-being worldwide.

Here is a list of references related to the use of alternative medicine by women. These references include studies, books, reviews, and reports from credible sources in the field of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and women's health.

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