

# Naturopathic Medicine

## Introduction to Naturopathic Medicine

(Excerpted from [The Pocket Guide to Naturopathic Medicine](#) by Judith Boice, N.D., L.Ac.)

Naturopathic medicine relies on the oldest, most clinically researched medicines available – natural therapeutics that have been effectively applied for tens of thousands of years. Today’s practice of naturopathic medicine combines the best of contemporary technology with time-honored, effective remedies from the past.

Many techniques or healing modalities fit under the umbrella of naturopathic medicine. The philosophy of naturopathic medicine unifies this group of diverse practices. A core aspect of this philosophy, outlined more fully below, is that treatment must be individualized to meet the needs of a particular patient. Naturopathic medicine treats diseases by treating people. Ten people with similar cold or flu symptoms may walk into my office, and those ten patients would probably walk out with ten different treatment plans, tailored to suit their particular needs.

This diversity in treatment methods makes naturopathic medicine difficult for some people to understand. Legislative bodies understand other healing modalities, acupuncture for example, more readily because the tool or method of healing is consistent from patient to patient. Acupuncturists use needles. Chiropractic physicians administer force or non-force methods of “adjustment.” Medical doctors prescribe pharmaceutical drugs and surgery.

A naturopathic physician, however, has a vast array of potential treatments from which to choose. Naturopathic medical students study all of the medical sciences, including clinical and physical diagnosis, pathology, anatomy (with dissection lab), biochemistry, physiology, pharmacology, and specialty areas such as pediatrics, gynecology, and cardiology – in short, all of the courses taught at any medical school. In addition naturopathic physicians spend several hundred hours studying courses that have disappeared from most medical school curricula, including counseling, nutrition, exercise therapeutics, homeopathy, botanical medicine, hydrotherapy, and physical therapies.

Like any doctor, a naturopathic physician takes medical histories, performs physical exams, orders lab tests, and makes diagnoses. A naturopathic doctor differs from other physicians only in how she or he *treats* the diagnosed illness, in what he or she does with the information gathered. A treatment plan might include nutritional counseling, a homeopathic prescription, and discussion of how a specific exercise program would benefit the patient’s health. The discussion may cover job or family pressures and how they are impacting the patient’s life. If indicated, an office visit may include some form of physical therapy, either soft tissue or osseous (bone) manipulation. Occasionally a condition requires minor surgery, e.g. removal of skin tags or closure of a laceration. Finally, in certain situations, a naturopathic physician may choose to prescribe pharmaceutical drugs.

### **Naturopathic Medical Philosophy**

#### ***Vis Medicatrix Naturae: The Healing Power of Nature.***

Both our human bodies and the Earth have an innate wisdom that governs the cycles of birth, growth, maturation, and decay. Body health is supported by moving and living in harmony with these natural cycles. Some of the most potent healing substances come directly from the Earth: fire, water, air, and earth (minerals and clay). Botanical medicines rely on the healing capacities of the Plant People. Plant, mineral, and animal substances provide the foundation for homeopathic medicines. Each of these medications has an intelligence and healing ability onto itself. This native, “natural” intelligence interacts with our own bodies’ healing wisdom to bring about balance, harmony, and health within ourselves. Health is the result of balance, which may be maintained by what appear to be

destructive forces (e.g. fever or inflammation) that ultimately restore the health and vitality of our bodies.

### ***Tolle Causum*: Identify and Treat the Cause**

Illness does not occur without cause. The body, in its elegant wisdom, always whispers before it shouts. Informed health care means learning to listen to the body and its early warning signs. Body symptoms are metaphors, or perhaps more accurately markers, of shifts and changes in life processes. Symptoms usually are the result of the body trying to rebalance itself. Identifying the cause requires seeking the root of the problem, seeking psychic, social, and spiritual as well as physical causes of disease. Symptomatic treatment rarely addresses the underlying disturbance. In fact, symptomatic treatment may suppress the illness and make the cause more difficult to identify. Treating the cause requires addressing the body as a whole.

### **First Do No Harm**

Classical, natural therapeutics aim to rebalance the body with the least invasive treatments possible. In practice, I always begin with the simplest treatments (generally dietary changes and hydrotherapy) before adding more complex, and more expensive, treatments. I will prescribe a well balanced herbal formula before recommending a bag full of supplements. “Doing no harm” also includes implementing therapies that nourish and strengthen the body. Both western and eastern classical medical traditions employ “tonics,” herbs and other formulas that strengthen the body. These tonics generally are prescribed after long term illnesses and births (for the mother), and for preventative care. The Chinese, for example, often drink special teas and eat certain foods at the change of each season to prepare the body for new environmental conditions.

### **Doctor as Teacher**

The Latin root for the word doctor is *docere* which means “to teach.” The physician’s primary function is to provide information, to empower people to regulate their own health. The information becomes empowering when someone actually applies the information in his or her life. A naturopathic physician spends a great deal of time educating patients. Once a patient has applied the information and achieved improved levels of health, the physician serves as a source of further information for emergencies, or as a coach for reaching even greater levels of health.

### **Treat the Whole Person**

The cause of disease is almost always multi factorial; hence, the treatment must be multi-faceted as well. I usually ask a patient, “What is going on in your life? Why do think you are ill right now?” Some are surprised. They are not used to having a physician include anything but physical symptoms in their diagnostic work up. Many already know the cause of their illness. Others need coaching and cajoling to understand that their physical bodies are intimately linked with their mental, emotional, and spiritual lives.

I do not mean to imply that all illnesses have an emotional, mental, or spiritual cause. At one time, I was convinced that all illness was due to an issue(s) that a patient was manifesting through a physical illness. Identifying and changing emotional/mental patterns would resolve the physical illness. Over time my thinking has changed. Sometimes people do create diseases to work through “issues.” Sometimes people have an iron deficiency because they have an iron deficiency, not because they have some great cosmic lesson to learn. Letting go of the need to find a “metaphysical” cause for every illness has allowed me to be much less judgmental, and much more understanding of the complexities of health and disease. Abandoning my certainty about the causes of disease provides much more room for the great mystery of health and disease to express itself.

## **Prevention**

Preventative care requires studying health as closely as the processes of disease. Most conventional medical practices focus on disease, returning patients from a prone position (crisis intervention) to standing. Classical medicine can also return patients from a prone to a standing position. In addition, classical medicine can help people to walk, run, and finally *dance* in their physical forms. Conventional medicine aims for survival; classical medicine aims for optimal health.

True preventative medicine requires making daily investments in our health: eating foods that nourish our bodies, exercising, developing loving relationships and supportive communities, contributing to the health of the Earth. Healthy people live in healthy environments. Preventative medicine means working for clean air, land, and water. Human health is inseparable from the health of the planet.

### **Which states license naturopathic physicians?**

The following states license naturopathic doctors as primary care physicians:

Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington.

### **How can I find a naturopathic physician with medical training?**

Visit the web site for the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP). All of the naturopathic doctors listed on this web site are licensed, primary care physicians:

<http://www.naturopathic.org>

You can also ask your “naturopath” what school she or he attended. The following North American schools are four-year naturopathic medical schools:

#### [National College of Naturopathic Medicine](#)

##### [Ross Island Center](#)

049 S.W. Porter  
Portland, OR 97201  
503.499.4343

##### [Bastyr University](#)

14500 Juanita Dr. NE  
Kenmore, WA 98028-4966  
425.823.1300

##### [Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine & Health Sciences](#)

2140 East Broadway Rd.  
Tempe, AZ 85282  
480.858.9100

##### [University of Bridgeport, College of Naturopathic Medicine](#)

60 Lafayette St.  
Bridgeport, CT 06601  
203.576.4109

##### [Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine](#)

1255 Sheppard Avenue East  
North York, Ontario M2K 1E2  
416.498.1255

**What if my naturopath graduated from another school?**

The following school is NOT a four-year medical school program:

[The Clayton School of Natural Healing](#)

Graduates from this school may have knowledge of natural therapeutics, but they are not physicians trained to diagnose and treat diseases.