

Naturopathic Medicine in Vermont

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A study sponsored by physicians at Fletcher Allen Healthcare in 1998 found that 53 % of Vermonters in Chittenden and surrounding counties used some form of natural or complementary medicine. Known for their appreciation of the natural environment and healthy living, it's no surprise that people from the Green Mountain state gravitate toward natural medicine at levels even higher than the national average, which runs about 50% in most studies.

News stories about the risks associated with some forms of natural medicine, such as the use of ephedra for weight loss, raise concerns for some people about using over-the-counter remedies without supervision. How does one know if extra amounts of a certain nutrient are really needed? Could there be interactions with medications I'm taking? Which form is best, and how do I know?

In 1996, the Vermont Legislature granted licensure to a profession of physicians who are highly trained in nutritional, herbal, lifestyle, and other natural therapies for minor acute and all chronic conditions. Naturopathic physicians (N.D.s) help patients work with minimally-invasive and natural therapies, and seek to prevent many chronic and debilitating diseases such as arthritis, diabetes and heart disease. N.D.'s can guide patients in the appropriate and safe use of natural medicines, either as a primary treatment for a health concern, or as complementary therapy.

Naturopathic physicians are trained as outpatient primary care doctors, through rigorous 4-5 year medical schools, following standard premed prerequisites. They use standard medical procedures, such as examination, lab work and X-rays to diagnose disease, and collaborate with other health care professionals when appropriate. The Vermont Secretary of State's office regulates the practice naturopathic medicine, and guarantees the training and credentialing of all N.D.s in the state.

Many Vermonters use naturopathic physicians for their routine care, such as physical exams, Pap smears, care for infections, gastrointestinal problems, gynecological issues, mental/emotional health and more. Others maintain care with another provider, and seek naturopathic advice as complementary medicine. Both are appropriate.

Currently, most insurance companies in Vermont do not recognize N.D.'s as providers, despite their training, licensure, and scope of practice. Therefore, most patients who chose a naturopathic physician for their health care must pay out-of-pocket for office visits, labs and prescriptive items which would be covered by other types of providers. In 2004-2005, legislation has been introduced in Montpelier, which will insure that every Vermonter's health insurance recognizes N.D.'s, and can access physicians who are experts in preventive and natural medicine. For more information on how you can support this legislation, please visit the website of the Vermont Association of Naturopathic Physicians, at www.VANP.org.