

## **The Influence of Cultural Beliefs on Alternative Medicine Practices**

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### **Abstract**

Cultural beliefs play an important role in shaping how people understand health, illness, healing, and acceptable forms of treatment. Traditional, complementary, and alternative medicine practices are often embedded within cultural histories, family traditions, community knowledge, and personal philosophies. This paper examines the influence of cultural beliefs on alternative medicine practices, focusing on cultural identity, family and community influence, beliefs about nature and healing, trust, patient autonomy, accessibility, health information, professional relationships, and contemporary integration. WHO defines traditional medicine as systems and practices originating in diverse historical and cultural contexts and emphasizes culturally respectful, evidence-based and safe approaches to integration. Research also indicates that motivations for traditional and complementary medicine use can include cultural traditions, personal preferences, and perceptions of effectiveness. A systematic review found that beliefs concerning control and participation, holistic views of illness, natural treatments, and broader philosophies of life can predict complementary and alternative medicine use. Recent policy research further emphasizes cultural relevance as a facilitator of TCIM use. The paper argues that cultural beliefs should be respected as an important influence on healthcare behaviour while distinguishing cultural meaning and personal preference from scientific evidence of effectiveness.

### **Keywords**

Cultural Beliefs; Alternative Medicine; Traditional Medicine; Complementary Medicine; Healthcare Practices; Health Behaviour; Cultural Identity; Patient Choice; Integrative Healthcare; Health Beliefs

### **Introduction**

Health behaviour is influenced by social and cultural environments. Ideas about the causes of illness, the meaning of symptoms, acceptable treatments, the role of family, and the relationship between humans and nature can all affect healthcare choices.

Traditional medicine is particularly connected to cultural context. WHO defines it as codified or non-codified systems of healthcare and well-being originating in different historical and cultural settings. Complementary medicine refers to additional non-mainstream practices, while integrative medicine combines biomedical and traditional or complementary knowledge in an evidence-based approach.

Cultural beliefs may influence whether individuals prefer herbal remedies, traditional medical systems, mind-body practices, spiritual approaches, or other alternative therapies. A systematic review found that beliefs about control, participation, holism, natural treatments, and general philosophies of life were associated with complementary and alternative medicine use.

The influence of culture does not mean that all culturally established practices are clinically effective. Rather, culture helps explain why people choose particular practices and how they interpret their experiences with healthcare.

This paper examines nine dimensions of cultural influence: health beliefs, family and community, cultural identity, nature and healing, trust, accessibility, health information, practitioner relationships, and evidence-informed integration.

### **1. Cultural Beliefs and Concepts of Health**

Culture provides frameworks through which people interpret health and illness. In some communities, health may be understood through balance, harmony, spirituality, relationships, diet, environment, or social connectedness. Traditional medicine systems often reflect these broader concepts. WHO notes that traditional medicine commonly emphasizes holistic and personalized approaches involving the balance of mind, body, and environment.

### **2. Family, Community, and Intergenerational Influence**

Healthcare knowledge is often transmitted through families and communities. Parents, grandparents, community elders, friends, and local practitioners may influence beliefs about herbal remedies, traditional treatments, dietary practices, or alternative therapies. Intergenerational knowledge can preserve culturally important practices, but health information passed through social networks may also include inaccurate claims. Contemporary health education should therefore respect family knowledge while encouraging evidence-informed decisions.

### **3. Cultural Identity and Alternative Medicine**

Alternative and traditional health practices can become part of cultural identity. People may use familiar practices not only because of perceived therapeutic effects but also because those practices represent heritage, community belonging, and continuity. WHO's current strategy recognizes Indigenous Peoples' rights, culture, health, and protection of traditional knowledge as important principles for TCIM policy.

### **4. Beliefs About Nature, Natural Remedies, and Healing**

Many alternative medicine users associate health with natural products, balance, and reduced reliance on pharmaceutical interventions. Such beliefs can influence interest in herbal medicine, traditional diets, plant-based remedies, and mind-body practices. However, “natural” does not automatically mean safe or effective. Herbal products may have active ingredients, adverse effects, contamination risks, or interactions with medicines.

### **5. Trust, Familiarity, and Perceived Effectiveness**

Trust can develop through cultural familiarity, previous personal experience, recommendations from relatives, and relationships with traditional practitioners. Positive experiences may reinforce continued use even when users have limited knowledge of scientific evidence. Trust is valuable for healthcare engagement, but responsible healthcare requires distinguishing perceived effectiveness from evidence established through appropriate research.

### **6. Accessibility, Affordability, and Cultural Acceptability**

Cultural acceptability can make alternative medicine more accessible to particular populations. WHO notes that traditional medicine remains a first choice for some communities because it can be culturally acceptable, available, and affordable. Understanding these factors is important for health systems seeking to improve equitable access to culturally responsive care.

### **7. Social Media, Health Information, and Changing Beliefs**

Cultural beliefs are increasingly influenced by digital communication. Social media, online communities, video platforms, wellness influencers, and digital health content can reinforce traditional practices or introduce alternative therapies to new audiences. Digital platforms can preserve cultural knowledge and connect communities, but they can also amplify misinformation and commercial health claims.

### **8. Practitioner-Patient Relationships and Cultural Competence**

Effective healthcare communication requires sensitivity to cultural beliefs. Patients may be more willing to discuss traditional or alternative medicine when healthcare professionals respond respectfully rather than dismissing their beliefs. Culturally responsive communication can improve disclosure of complementary medicine use and help practitioners identify possible interactions, unsafe practices, or delays in necessary treatment.

### **9. Cultural Respect, Evidence, and Contemporary Integration**

The growing recognition of traditional and complementary medicine creates a need to balance cultural respect with scientific responsibility. WHO's Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034 emphasizes strengthening evidence, ensuring safety and quality, appropriate regulation, and integration of safe and effective practices into health systems. Cultural acceptance should not be treated as proof of clinical effectiveness, while lack of familiarity within biomedical systems should not automatically lead to dismissal of culturally significant practices.

### **Comparative Overview**

| Cultural Factor   | Influence on Alternative Medicine            | Contemporary Healthcare Implication           |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Family traditions | Transmits knowledge, practices and treatment | Encourage respectful discussion and evidence- |

|                                | preferences                                                 | based education                                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural identity              | Strengthens attachment to traditional practices             | Protect cultural knowledge and avoid inappropriate appropriation    |
| Beliefs about nature           | May increase preference for natural or traditional remedies | Explain that natural products can still have risks and interactions |
| Community trust                | Recommendations can influence treatment choices             | Build culturally sensitive communication and trust                  |
| Accessibility                  | Familiar practices may be more available or affordable      | Address healthcare inequities while maintaining quality standards   |
| Spiritual and holistic beliefs | Can shape explanations of illness and healing               | Respect beliefs while clearly communicating clinical evidence       |
| Digital influence              | Spreads traditional and alternative health information      | Strengthen digital health literacy and misinformation awareness     |

### Illustration

The following illustration presents cultural beliefs as interconnected influences on alternative medicine, including cultural values, family and community, traditions, and individual healthcare choices.

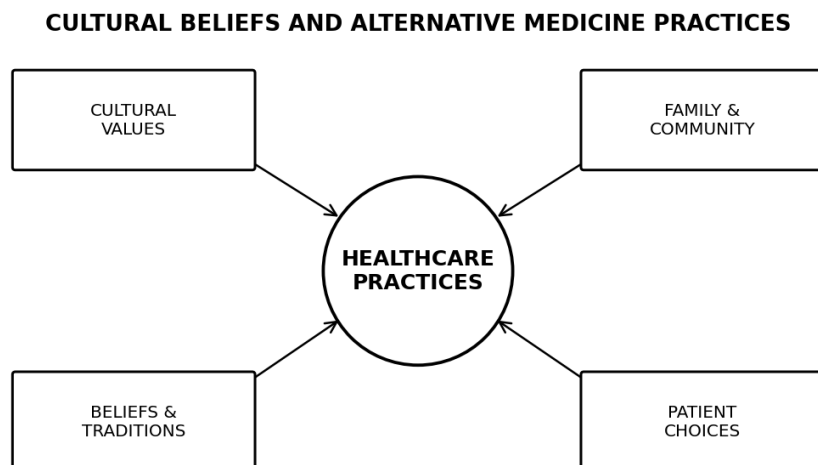


Figure 1. Cultural beliefs and alternative medicine practices.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural beliefs have a significant influence on how people understand health and choose alternative or traditional medicine practices. Family traditions, cultural identity, concepts of nature and healing, community trust, accessibility, and personal experience can all shape healthcare behaviour.

Cultural influence should nevertheless be distinguished from evidence of clinical effectiveness. WHO's current strategy emphasizes culturally respectful healthcare while simultaneously requiring stronger evidence, safety standards, regulation, qualified practice, and appropriate integration.

The most constructive approach is culturally responsive and evidence-informed. Healthcare systems should respect traditional knowledge and patient beliefs, encourage open communication, evaluate individual practices rigorously, and ensure that effective medical care is not delayed or replaced by unsupported alternatives.

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