

# What is HOMEOPATHY?

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The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional Western medicine. From 2000 to 2002, the American Academy of Pediatrics convened and charged the Task Force on Complementary and Alternative Medicine to address issues related to its use in children and to develop resources to educate physicians, patients, and families.<sup>1</sup> This is the first of a series CAM articles that will cover some of the more common modalities currently being used in pediatrics.

## Background and Theory

Homeopathy, a therapeutic system developed over 200 years ago by a German physician, Samuel Hahnemann, is based on the principle of “like cures like,” allowing stimulation of self-healing processes. The principle states that a disease can be cured by a substance that produces similar symptoms in healthy people. Homeopathy is often confused with herbal medicine, but unlike herbs, homeopathy uses “ultra-molecular” dilutions of substances often derived from minerals, plants or animals to treat disease.

The hypothesis for mechanism of action is not pharmacological, but biophysical; that some form of information is transferred from the diluted substance to the diluting agent as the higher dilutions often contain not even a single molecule of the original substance.<sup>2</sup> In vitro studies have demonstrated intriguing changes that occur at a cellular level when there is exposure to water treated with homeopathic dilutions.<sup>3</sup>

## Indications

Homeopathy can be used to treat many acute and chronic conditions such as otitis media, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections, allergic rhinitis, skin disorders, as well as sleep and behavioral problems. In a primary care office, homeopathy can be useful to stop progression of an acute condition or to potentially avoid initiation of antibiotic. It may also be used adjunctively with conventional drugs. For example, homeopathic arnica is used as adjunct for any initial musculoskeletal trauma; homeopathic dilutions of apis or histaminium for hives. Otitis media may be treated with a

number of different homeopathics. However, NCCAM states that most analyses have concluded there is little evidence to support homeopathy as an effective treatment for any specific condition, although a number of studies have reported positive findings.

## Efficacy

While it would seem implausible that homeopathics could have any effect over placebo, there are three independent systematic reviews of placebo-controlled trials on homeopathy that report that its effects seem to be more than placebo.<sup>4-7</sup>

There are more than 130 randomized, controlled clinical trials of homeopathy published in peer-reviewed journals, with at least fifteen of these focused on the pediatric population.<sup>8</sup> Several systematic reviews were positive for treatment of childhood diarrhea, influenza, postoperative ileus, seasonal allergic rhinitis, vertigo, and rheumatic diseases.<sup>9-14</sup> Other examples include a crossover study of children with ADHD showing statistically significant improvement in the homeopathic group,<sup>15</sup> and a placebo-controlled trial of homeopathy for children with otitis media showing a decrease in duration of pain and a more recurrence-free rate in the following year.<sup>16</sup>

## Safety

Unlike herbs and supplements, homeopathics have been FDA regulated in the same manner as nonprescription over-the-counter drugs in the US since 1939. The preparation process inherent to homeopathy minimizes any risk of pharmacological side effects, and there is apparently no interaction with drugs. Rarely there are reports of “aggravation,” which is a phenomenon of transient worsening of symptoms before improvement.<sup>17</sup> Homeopathics are extremely safe, however, reports of adverse effects have been found when herbal products are confused with homeopathics.

## Practical Issues

Homeopathic medicines are easy to take as they are in the form of tiny tablets or beads, given sublingually (or dissolved in water). Although they are available over the counter, self use is generally limited to treating acute and minor symptoms as chronic conditions are best directed by a physician with expertise in homeopathy. The choice of a homeopathic is based on a person's unique symptom presentation.





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## Summary

Homeopathics are often confused with herbs. It is important to know that homeopathics have no pharmacologically active ingredients, do not interact with prescribed drugs, and are therefore extremely safe. Due to the non-pharmacologic nature and its unknown mechanism, skepticism abounds on its efficacy despite a body of literature showing

that its effect is beyond a placebo. While there is a need for more well designed studies, homeopathy is a potentially effective treatment that pediatricians can recommend to patients. Pediatricians can refer patients to a professional homeopath or take training courses<sup>18</sup> and easily integrate homeopathy into their practice.

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