

# Sizing Up the Market for Alternative Medicine

## Highly Educated, High-Income Americans Most Likely to Try Everything from Herbal Supplements to Reiki

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Are reflexology, hypnosis, ginkgo biloba, and acupuncture the real secrets to good health? More than 37 percent of U.S. households say they've sought out treatments such as these over the past 12 months, confirming that alternative medicine is more than a passing fad. A Thomson Medstat survey of 23,000 households found that alternative therapies of every stripe — from herbal supplements to the 5,000-year-old Indian medical system Ayurveda — are regularly used to treat everything from lower back pain to diabetes.

This Thomson Medstat Research Brief examines trends in the use of alternative medicine in the United States — tracking the prevalence of various therapies, use among different socio-economic groups, and the most common reasons for seeking out treatment alternatives.

### Key Findings

- More than 37 percent of U.S. households are using some form of alternative medicine.
- Alternative medicine use is most prevalent among those with incomes over \$100,000 per year and those with post-graduate college degrees.
- Approximately 42 percent of respondents said their alternative treatments were at least partially covered by insurance.
- Nearly two-thirds said their physicians were aware of their use of alternative treatments.
- The most common reason for using an alternative treatment is to promote general wellness.
- Herbal supplements and massage/chiropractic care are the most commonly used types of alternative medicine, followed by mind and body practices, energy therapies, and naturopathy.

### Method

Data for this Research Brief were aggregated from the 2006 PULSE survey. Conducted annually by Thomson Medstat, PULSE is the nation's largest ongoing, privately sponsored consumer health survey. It provides information on more than 80 topics from a balanced national sample of 100,000 randomly selected respondents. The survey is conducted in nine separate waves throughout the calendar year. The two waves cited in this report are based on a telephone survey of 23,000 adults conducted between January and June 2006. All results have undergone statistical testing, and all comparisons are significant at the 90-percent confidence level, unless otherwise noted.

### Observations and Conclusions

#### *Sizing up the market*

The survey results are consistent with a 2002 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey, which found that 36 percent of Americans were using some sort of “complementary and alternative” therapy. The Thomson Medstat survey digs deeper into this phenomenon to find out why people use alternative

treatments — just over 40 percent said they do so to promote “general wellness,” one-third are treating an illness, about 10 percent are supplementing traditional care, and 10 percent are trying to stave off illness.

**Figure 1: Primary reason for using an alternative treatment**

<b>General wellness</b>	40.8%
<b>To treat an illness</b>	32.5%
<b>To supplement traditional care</b>	10.2%
<b>To prevent an illness</b>	9.9%
<b>Other</b>	5.4%

### *Exploring demographic patterns*

Those households most apt to seek alternative therapies are at the top end of the income and education brackets. Half of all households earning more than \$100,000 annually sought alternative treatment. Likewise, half of those with post-graduate degrees used alternative medicine. These numbers drop to 30 percent of households earning \$15,000–\$24,999 per year and 18.1 percent of those without high school diplomas.

**Figure 2: Use of alternative medicine by income and education**

<b>All respondents</b>	37.2%
<b>Income over \$100,000</b>	49.9%
<b>Post graduate education</b>	49.6%
<b>Income between \$15,000 - \$24,999</b>	30.1%
<b>No high school diploma</b>	18.1%

There also are variations along racial and ethnic lines: 47.4 percent of those classifying themselves as mixed-race say they use alternative medicines, along with 39 percent of white Americans, 37.3 percent of both Native Americans and Asians, 33.2 percent of Hispanic Americans; and 26.6 percent of African Americans.

**Figure 3: Use of alternative medicine by race and ethnicity**

<b>All respondents</b>	37.2%
<b>Mixed race</b>	47.4%
<b>White</b>	39.0%
<b>Native American</b>	37.3%
<b>Asian or Pacific islander</b>	37.3%
<b>Hispanic</b>	33.2%
<b>Black</b>	26.6%

The survey found that people in the 35- to 64-year-old age group led the pack of alternative medicine users, with 40.3 percent opting for alternative medicine in the past year. They were followed closely by the under-35 age group with 38.2 percent. And 28 percent of those in the over-65 age group have opted for alternatives over the last year.

**Figure 4: Use of alternative medicine by age**

All respondents	37.2%
Under 35	38.2%
35-64	40.3%
Over 65	28.3%

### *Does your doctor know? The intersection of traditional and alternative medicine*

As the popularity of alternative medical treatments has escalated, a major concern among practitioners of traditional medicine is the potential for an adverse reaction between various over-the-counter herbal therapies and prescription drugs. Thanks in large part to grassroots efforts among doctors to ask patients about their use of alternative treatments, a majority of households (64.1 percent) report that their doctors are aware of their alternative medicine usage. Moreover, 41.9 percent said that their alternative medicines were covered by insurance.

**Figure 5**

Insurance covered at least part of cost	41.9%
Informed physician about alternative treatments	64.1%

### *The correlation between ailments and alternative medicine*

The 2006 PULSE survey asked respondents whether they suffered from various diseases — ranging from heartburn to cancer. Figure 6 shows the percentage of respondents with specific disorders who said they had used alternative treatments in the previous year.

**Figure 6: Rate of alternative medicine use among people with specific chronic conditions**

Irritable bowel	46.6%
Lower back pain	45.9%
Skin problems	44.7%
Heartburn	40.1%
Osteoporosis	36.2%
Cancer	35.8%
Incontinence	34.4%
Benign prostate enlargement	34.1%
Diabetes	32.1%

### *Most common alternative treatments*

Herbal supplements and massage/chiropractic therapy are the clear favorites among the different types of alternative medicines — 23 percent of U.S. households said they take herbal supplements and 22 percent use massage or chiropractic therapy. Use of herbal supplements is highest among those with irritable bowel syndrome, and massage therapy is most frequently used by patients with lower back pain. Mind/body therapies such as hypnosis and meditation are most common among people with skin problems, while energy therapies such as Reiki are most prevalent among those with osteoporosis. And patients with benign prostate enlargement are the most likely to use naturopathy, acupuncture, or Ayurveda.

**Figure 7: Popularity of various treatments**

Herbal supplements	23.0%
Massage/chiropractic	22.1%
Mind/body practices (hypnosis, meditation)	6.5%
Naturopathy, acupuncture, Ayurveda)	3.2%
Energy therapies (Reiki, magnets)	2.6%

## Conclusion

### *Those with the most healthcare options are driving demand for alternative modalities*

Despite widespread concern about the lack of FDA oversight over the alternative healthcare marketplace and the potential for adverse reactions between traditional medications and alternative supplements, the most highly educated and well paid Americans continue to drive the growth of the alternative medicine movement. It is instructive to note that the demographic group with arguably the most healthcare resources at its disposal is the most likely to seek alternatives outside the bounds of traditional Western medicine.

## Note

This study was last updated on September 21, 2006.

## Find Out More

For more information, please contact:

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