

WELLNESS > HOLISTIC HEALTH

# What Is a Naturopathic Doctor?

By [Laura Dorwart](#) Published on October 20, 2023

🔍 Medically reviewed by [Arno Kroner, DAOM](#)



SDI PRODUCTIONS / GETTY IMAGES

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#) Naturopathic doctors (NDs)—also known as doctors of naturopathic (NDs) or naturopathic physicians—are healthcare providers

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medical care rather than more conventional treatments, such as prescription drugs.<sup>[1]</sup>

As primary healthcare providers, NDs can diagnose and treat various health conditions. They focus on treating underlying causes and may offer herbal medicine, nutritional therapy, and [massage therapy](#), in addition to counseling and stress reduction techniques. Some of these modalities are clinically evidence-based, while others remain controversial.<sup>[2]</sup>

## What Does a Naturopathic Doctor Do?

Naturopathic medicine first developed in Germany and other areas of Europe during the 19th century. It emphasizes disease prevention, health promotion, and treating the “whole patient.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## Naturopathic Principles

Naturopathic doctors adhere to the following principles of medical care:<sup>[3]</sup>

**First Do No Harm:** Start with the most natural and least invasive therapies and refer the patient to another healthcare provider if something is outside your scope of practice.

**The Healing Power of Nature:** Use naturally occurring substances, such as herbs, to treat health conditions if possible. Promote the body’s ability to heal itself.

**Identify and Treat the Causes:** Find and treat the potential underlying causes of a condition rather than treating symptoms alone.

**Doctor as Teacher:** Honor the value of the doctor-patient relationship while empowering patients to take responsibility for their own health.

**Prevention:** Support health by helping patients practice healthy ways of living.

## Treatment Modalities

The scope of what naturopathic doctors can offer varies based on their particular specialty and training, as well as the regulations and restrictions in their state. They may work in a variety of modalities, including: <sup>[1]</sup>

**Nutritional therapy:** Nutrition is a core component of naturopathy and might include specific dietary plans. <sup>[4]</sup>

**Botanical medicine:** Also known as herbal medicine, this approach uses plants or substances derived from plants—for example, in [supplement](#) form.

**Homeopathic medicine:** This controversial medical system is centered around two theories—"like cures like" (use a substance that produces symptoms similar to the condition being treated) and "law of minimum doses" (use very diluted medications). <sup>[5]</sup>

**Manipulative therapy:** Hands-on therapy might include massage therapy (manipulation of soft tissue, usually by applying soothing pressure to different parts of your body) and craniosacral therapy (applying gentle pressure to your head, neck, and back to reduce compression and tension in joints and connective tissue). <sup>[6]</sup>

**Lifestyle management:** This might include [sleep](#) and [exercise](#) habits, relationships, stressors, and environmental factors like potential exposure to toxins. <sup>[7]</sup>

**Psychotherapy:** Also known as [talk therapy](#), this form of [mental health](#) treatment helps you process your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

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specific energy points in your body.

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## Naturopathic Doctor vs. Medical Doctor

Naturopathic doctors and medical doctors (MDs) need licenses to practice medicine. However, they receive different training—and different levels of training.

NDs must obtain a license to practice natural medicine. This requires the following:<sup>[8]</sup>

- Complete a four-year federally accredited naturopathic medical school program (accredited by the Council on Naturopathic Medical Education, or CNME, which is recognized by the United States Department of Education)

- Receive a certain amount of hands-on clinical training

- Pass the Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Examination (NPLEX)

MDs must do the following:<sup>[9]</sup><sup>[10]</sup>

- Pass the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)

- Complete a four-year medical school program

- Pass the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) to become state-licensed

- Attend a residency program (3-7 years depending on the program and specialty)

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Naturopathic doctors undergo much of the same training in biomedical sciences as conventional medical students, including anatomy, immunology, and biochemistry, and they provide many services that MDs do.<sup>[8]</sup> For example, they can prescribe certain medications, administer vaccines, and order diagnostic lab work (such as imaging and blood tests). Some naturopathic doctors also perform minor surgery.<sup>[11]</sup>

However, naturopathic doctors don't perform major surgery or prescribe controlled substances. They also do not offer more invasive treatments, such as [chemotherapy](#). Your ND will likely refer you to another healthcare provider if they can't provide the treatment you need.<sup>[11]</sup>

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## What Conditions Does a Naturopathic Doctor Diagnose and Treat?

Naturopathic doctors provide primary care to both individuals and families. According to the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians (AANP), people frequently report visiting NDs for help with symptoms and conditions such as:<sup>[11]</sup>

[Fatigue](#)

[Insomnia](#)

Gastrointestinal disorders (conditions affecting the [digestive system](#))

[Infertility](#)

Symptoms of [menopause](#) and [perimenopause](#)

[Chronic fatigue syndrome](#), CFS (a long-term condition that causes like extreme, unrelenting fatigue, sleep problems, [muscle](#)

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## [Fibromyalgia](#)

### Chronic pain

[Fibromyalgia](#) (a chronic condition that causes symptoms such as [widespread pain](#) throughout your body, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping)

## [Heart disease](#)

### Respiratory conditions

In some cases, NDs serve as part of an integrative team that includes several different healthcare providers. For example, they may provide complementary therapy to someone with cancer or a chronic condition like [diabetes](#) (a disease that occurs when you have higher than normal levels of [blood glucose](#), or blood sugar) who are undergoing more traditional treatments. <sup>[11]</sup>

## Going to the Naturopathic Doctor

In the United States, you can find a licensed naturopathic doctor on the AANP [online database](#). You may also be able to ask for a recommendation from your primary care provider. <sup>[12]</sup>

As of 2023, naturopathic doctors are licensed to treat patients in 23 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It is illegal to practice naturopathic medicine in certain states, including Tennessee and South Carolina. <sup>[8]</sup>

Not all naturopathic doctors accept insurance. However, many NDs offer sliding scale fees and payment plans. Check with your insurance plan and healthcare provider to see if your care can be covered. <sup>[13]</sup>

Your first visit with a naturopathic doctor will typically be a thorough assessment lasting 60-90 minutes. Your ND may ask you about your current symptoms, as well as your: <sup>[14]</sup>

### Family medical history

Personal health history

Current medications and supplements

Diet

Physical activity

Sleep

Mental health

Relationships

### Current stressors

Energy levels

After the first visit, you and your ND may devise a plan of care together based on your unique health goals. This might include hands-on therapy, such as spinal manipulation or acupuncture, as well as lifestyle changes like modifications to your diet and exercise routine. <sup>[15]</sup>

## How to Prepare for a Visit to a Naturopathic Doctor

Your first visit with an ND may be more thorough and in-depth than you might expect from a typical check-up. Before visiting a naturopathic doctor, think about your health goals—for example, relief of certain symptoms, improved energy levels, or better sleep quality.

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Medical records

Family medical history

A list of medications and supplements you currently take

Current symptoms or health concerns

What you eat in a typical day and if you notice any symptoms after eating certain foods

## A Quick Review

Naturopathic doctors (NDs) are healthcare providers who practice various kinds of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). NDs generally prioritize preventative and holistic approaches to diagnose and treat patients, and they provide many services that MDs do. For example, they can prescribe certain medications, administer vaccines, and order diagnostic lab work (such as imaging and blood tests).

You might consider visiting a naturopathic doctor if you'd like to improve your overall health and well-being using lifestyle changes and alternative medicine. Many people like to work with naturopathic doctors to reduce the risk of potential health conditions in the future. An ND may also be able to help you if you are experiencing symptoms that haven't responded to more conventional forms of medical treatment.

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**How is a naturopathic doctor different from a naturopath?**

In the United States, naturopathic doctors have a four-year degree  
luate program accredited by the Council on Naturopathic

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amount of hands-on clinical training to become licensed. <sup>[16]</sup>

Naturopaths are more like health coaches. There is no standardized education or on-site training, and they do not have licenses.

Naturopaths may hold some of the same principles as many NDs—such as believing in the value of certain forms of alternative medicine—but they cannot diagnose or treat illness. <sup>[16]</sup>

### What type of training does a naturopathic doctor have?

To obtain a graduate degree in naturopathic medicine, aspiring naturopathic doctors study anatomy, biology, biochemistry, immunology, genetics, pathology, and physiology. They may also take classes like nutrition, botany, radiology, herbal medicine, and sports medicine. <sup>[16]</sup>

Accredited naturopathic medical schools also require students to undergo at least 1,200 hours of hands-on clinical training. This involves working with patients directly while under the supervision of a working naturopathic physician. <sup>[16]</sup>

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with holistic practitioner

 An ayurvedic therapist is checking person's pulse during a

 A woman sitting inside an infrared sauna

 Close-up of a man getting a massage

 a woman relaxing in the shower

 Person talking to homeopathic practitioner

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massage therapist  
is applying Thai  
massage

 Shungite  
crumbs on a white  
background

 Health Photo  
Composite -  
Chakras

 Woman  
receiving a  
massage

 ayurvedic-diet

 Person sitting  
with eyes closed,  
waving palo santo  
stick for relaxation

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multiracial or  
Latina woman  
meditating at

 Man looking at  
his phone

 Health Benefits  
of Chlorella

 An Asian woman  
practicing  
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