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## Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine by Immigrants

### The Role of Acculturation

The use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) has increased substantially in the United States over the last two decades. Survey data indicates that the proportion of adults using CAM practices, therapies, and products within the last year increased from 34 percent in 1990 to 62 percent in 2002. The annual number of visits to CAM providers is now higher than the number of visits to primary care physicians, and yearly out-of-pocket expenditures on CAM services exceed \$ 27 billion. Such a growth in CAM use coincides with an ongoing increase in the proportion of the foreign-born population in the US. The relative size of the U.S. immigrant population has grown from eight percent in 1990 to 11.7 percent in 2003. According to projections from the US Census Bureau, by 2045, as many as 13.3 percent of the US population would have been born abroad. Due to their lower socioeconomic status and other barriers (e.g., language proficiency and health literacy) in access to medical services, many immigrants resort to CAM to meet their health care needs. The increasing share of the foreign-born population in the US highlights the need for assessing the role of acculturation in the use of CAM.

A recent study by Dejun Su, Lifeng Li, and José A. Pagán from The University of Texas-Pan American examined the linkages between acculturation and CAM use among immigrants in the US.

Their study assessed how acculturation was related to the odds of using at least one CAM modality as well as the odds of using specific CAM modalities in the past 12 months. They hypothesized that as immigrants live longer in the US, they are more likely to resemble native-born Americans in terms of CAM use. Another related hypothesis is that immigrants who show a higher level of English proficiency are more like native-born Americans in terms of CAM use than those with a lower level of English proficiency.

Data from the 2002 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) on 31,044 adults were analyzed to estimate the effects of acculturation on the likelihood of using different CAM therapies over the past 12 months prior to the survey. Acculturation was measured using nativity/length of residence in the US and language of interview. Several socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, marital status, total family income, health insurance coverage, employment status, self-reported health status, history of chronic disease, family size, and region of residence were also included in the analysis.

The results show that almost 62 percent of respondents reported that they had used at least one of 17 CAM therapies in the past 12 months. Among all these therapies,



prayer is the most commonly used, with 44.2 percent of the sample practicing it, followed by the use of herbal remedies, relaxation techniques, and chiropractic care (19.6, 15.3 and 7.7 percent, respectively). Eighty-six percent of the respondents were born in the US and 14 percent were born abroad. Among the foreign-born, 7.1 percent had lived in the US for 15 years or more, 2.3 percent between 10 and 15 years, 2.0 percent between 5 and 10 years, and 2.2 percent less than 5 years. And about 95 percent of the interviews were conducted in English, 2.8 percent in Spanish, 1.6 percent in English and Spanish, and 0.4 percent in languages other than English or Spanish.

The odds of using at least one CAM therapy during the past 12 months for immigrants who had been in the US for less than 5 years is 37 percent less than that for native-born Americans. The corresponding gap becomes 28 percent for immigrants who had been in the US for 5-10 years and 20 percent for those who had been in the US for 10-15 years. After 15 years or more in the US, however, there is virtually no difference between the native and foreign-born in the odds of using at least one CAM modality.

The lower rates of CAM use by recent immigrants deserve our attention. In the study, recent immigrants (defined as immigrants who have been in the US less than 10 years) were found to use chiropractic

care and massage therapies at a much lower rate than native-born Americans, which suggests that the likelihood of CAM use for recent immigrants is related to the cost or accessibility of these CAM therapies. It was also found that a lack of knowledge of CAM modalities in the US and lower perceived need for CAM use by recent immigrants could also explain their relatively lower rates of CAM use. The study also provides some evidence for exchangeability of the two common measures of acculturation: length of stay in the US and level of English proficiency.

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