

Key Points

1. Study used a national phone survey, with 2055 respondents, to assess how often people use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)
2. 35% of respondents had used prayer for health concerns in the past 12 months
3. 75% of those who prayed, prayed for general wellness
4. 69% of those who prayed for a specific medical condition found prayer to be very helpful
5. Most people combined prayer with traditional medicine (doctor visits), however, only 11% discussed prayer with their doctor
6. Women, people older than 33, and people with higher education (beyond high school) were more likely to pray for health
7. People with depression, headache, chronic back/neck pain, and digestive problems prayed more often for their condition than those without

Note

For more information on complementary and alternative medicines, visit the National Center For Complementary And Alternative Medicine (NCCAM); a center of the National Institutes of Health (NIH); <http://nccam.nih.gov/>

Source

McCaffrey AM, Eisenberg DM, Legedza AT, Davis RB, Phillips RS. Prayer for health concerns: results of a national survey on prevalence and patterns of use. Arch Intern Med. 2004 Apr 26;164(8):858-62.

Patients Turn to Prayer for Health Concerns

More than one-third of American adults use prayer for health concerns. This result came out of a study by Dr. Anne McCaffrey, at the Harvard Medical School, and her colleagues. Dr. McCaffrey used a nationwide phone survey to examine (see Table 1) the use of conventional medicine, the use of prayer for health, and the use of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM). The group published the results on the use of prayer in the April 26, 2004 issue of the journal Archives of Internal Medicine.

Table 1 - Survey Details

- National household telephone survey using random-digit dialing conducted in 1998
- Respondents were English speaking and 18 or older
- One respondent per household
- Survey asked about use of conventional medicine, use of prayer, and use of complementary and alternative therapies
- CAM therapies in the survey included acupuncture, chiropractic, homeopathy, herbal treatments, megavitamins, special diet, life-style diet, relaxation, guided imagery, massage, energy therapy, folk remedies, self-help techniques, biofeedback, hypnosis, naturopathy, yoga, and aromatherapy
- Survey took about 30 minutes
- Respondents were offered \$20

The survey was conducted in 1998 and solicited responses from 2055 people. In addition to asking about prayer and CAMs, the survey also collected demographic information about the respondents, including: sex, age, religion, education, income, employment status, race, marital status, health insurance, and geographic region. The respondents had to be over 18 and speak English. They were offered \$20 to participate in the 30 minute survey (some people who were reluctant initially were offered \$50).

The survey showed that 35% of the respondents had used prayer in the last 12 months for health concerns. The survey asked about both specific conditions (see Table 2) and prayer for general health. Of those who reported praying, 75% reported praying for overall health and wellbeing. Most of those surveyed - 72% - also used conventional medicine, meaning doctors, but the percent varied drastically by condition. Only 10% who used prayer for a psychiatric condition - such as depression - were also seeing a doctor or mental health professional. In contrast, 74% of those praying for cancer were also using traditional treatments.

**Table 2
Use Of Prayer For Selected Medical Conditions**

Condition	% With Condition Who Used Prayer
Depression	35
Anxiety	32
Arthritis	18
Back/neck pain	18
Headache	22
Digestive Problems	20
Heart Problems	21
Kidney Problems	20
Neurological Problems	29

Interestingly, of those praying for a specific medical condition, 69% reported that they found prayer to be very helpful. Despite the prevalence and perceived usefulness of prayer, most people did not discuss the use of prayer with their doctor. Only 11% said they discussed the issue with their doctor. The results seem to indicate that while many people use both prayer and traditional medicine, they keep them separate.

In analyzing the demographic data, the researchers found that women were much more likely to use prayer than

men. They also found that age played a role, with those over 54 being the most likely to use prayer, and those between 33-54 also using prayer more frequently than younger people. Education and religion also were factors in the frequency of prayer. Those with an education beyond high school were more likely to pray for their health as were non-Catholic Christians.

Not surprisingly, certain medical conditions were associated with a higher rate of prayer. Specifically, people with headaches, back/neck pain, depression, and gastrointestinal problems prayed more frequently for their health concerns than those without these conditions. The researches point out that these conditions are characterized by painful and aggravating symptoms, non-specific causes, and have limited, often ineffective treatment options.

Since the survey also included questions about many types of alternative therapies, the scientists were able to examine the use of these as related to the use of prayer. The group built a model which took into account age, sex, and religion, and found that increased prayer was associated with the use of herbal medicine, relaxation techniques, guided imagery, self-help techniques, folk remedies, energy therapy, and chiropractic therapies.

The main limitations of the study are that it relied on people to report their own medical conditions (not an objective measure) and that the questions about prayer were not in-depth. Despite this, the survey results - that many people use prayer, yet very few discuss it with their doctors - suggest that physicians should be open to discussions of spirituality with their patients.

--Rick Labuda

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