



Original article

# Current public awareness on the safety of traditional and complementary medicines (T&CM) in Malaysia

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) has always been an important part of healthcare. However, many people underestimate the benefits and also the risks of taking T&CM. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to analyse the public awareness of the efficacy and safety of T&CM compared to the conventional Western treatments in Malaysia.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was carried out with university staff and students residing in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on their perceptions and awareness of T&CM using an online self-administered questionnaire.

**Results:** Most respondents (85%,  $n=200$ ) preferred T&CM over the conventional Western treatments and had the impression that T&CM was safe. Herbal medicine (28%) was the most preferred form of T&CM to treat cough and cold as well as backache. About 51% of the respondents were unaware of the possible side effects of the T&CM but did not recognise the possibility of using counterfeits, men being more aware than women and 77% were more likely to inform clinician about their T&CM consumption. Respondents who were aware of T&CM counterfeits and herb–drug interactions reported experiencing significantly improvement but not those were aware of side effects. Only those aware of T&CM counterfeit would like to inform medical practitioners about their T&CM consumption.

**Conclusion:** The prevalence of T&CM was high but experiencing improvement through its use may attribute to different levels of awareness. Campaigns to educate public on T&CM are pertinent since the public awareness on the T&CM side effects still lacking.

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**Keywords:** Traditional; Complementary; Awareness; Safety; Knowledge; Malaysia

## Introduction

Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) has emerged again as an important part of modern healthcare despite being practiced before the advent of conventional Western treatments. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 80% of the population in Africa, Asia and Latin America use T&CM every year [1]. Almost half of the population from developed countries including United States, Australia, France and Canada use T&CM on a regular basis [2]. A study in Malaysia reported that the popularity of T&CM use among the elderly was associated with its lower cost, lower rate of side effects and better

accessibility compared to conventional Western medicines [3]. In Ghana, the expense of western medical treatments for malaria costs USD\$1.60 per treatment, compared with USD\$0.35 per treatment for herbal medicines and USD\$0.10 per treatment or almost free for home-grown herbs [4]. About two-thirds of all marketed drugs discovered in the past quarter-century have been derived from natural products such as artemisinin from *Artemisia annua*, a potent antimalarial herb found in East Asia [5].

Malaysia is a rapid developing country with a population approaching 28 million [6]. Recent studies reported that the prevalence of the use of T&CM in Malaysia was relatively high [7,8] especially for middle-aged adults who use them to enhance their well-being including sexual libido [9]. Studies have also shown that patients suffering with chronic diseases [8] and cancer [10] also prefer T&CM as their alternative source of treatment. As T&CM emerges as an alternative for both acute

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