

Guide to Complementary Therapies for Individuals with Cancer

Anyone considering use of complementary or alternative therapies should discuss their choices with their health care provider. Individual factors, as well as current treatments, will affect which complementary therapies will be right for you. The therapies listed below follow the recommendation guidelines of the Society for Clinical Oncology. If you do choose to use complementary therapies, you should also take care in choosing a practitioner who is properly qualified and experienced, and who understands your needs as an individual with cancer.

complementary therapies – Complementary therapies are used **along with** standard medical treatments. Examples include supportive measures to help control symptoms, enhance well-being, and contribute to overall care. (also called complementary medicine)

alternative therapies – Alternative therapies are used **in place of** standard medical treatments. These include therapies promoted as options to be used instead of mainstream care, often unproven by research. One example is using herbs to treat cancer instead of a method that an oncologist suggests. (also called alternative medicine)

integrative medicine - Integrative medicine is a **total approach to care** that involves the patient's mind, body, and spirit. It combines standard medicine with the practices that have shown the most promise. For example, some people learn to use relaxation as a way to reduce stress during chemotherapy.

Mind-Body Techniques (meditation, hypnosis, relaxation techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy, biofeedback, guided imagery, etc) Mind-body therapies have been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and mood disturbance in cancer patients. These therapies may also reduce chronic pain and procedural pain.

- *Meditation* – focused breathing or repetition of words or phrases to quiet the mind. Meditation has been associated with significant improvement in mood disturbances and symptoms of stress. Individuals also showed significant improvement in overall quality of life, stress and sleep quality.
- *Yoga* – several systems of stretches and poses, with special attention given to breathing. Yoga has been associated with improved quality of sleep.
- *Tai Chi* – a system of slow, gentle movements with a focus on the breath and concentration. Tai Chi has been associated with increased breathing capacity, muscular strength and flexibility, and improved health-related quality of life and self-esteem.
- *Hypnosis* - a state of relaxed and focused attention in which the individual concentrates on a certain feeling, idea, or suggestion to aid in healing; an artificially induced state of consciousness in which a person is highly receptive to suggestions. Hypnosis has been

beneficial in reducing pain, anxiety, phobias, nausea and vomiting. It can be used to treat anticipatory nausea and reduce post-operative nausea and vomiting.

Caution has been given by the World Health Organization that hypnosis should not be performed on individuals with a history of psychosis or certain personality disorders. A small percentage of individuals may experience dizziness, nausea, or headache.

- *Cognitive Behavioral Techniques* – therapeutic techniques based on modifying thoughts, assumptions, beliefs and behaviors, with the aim of influencing distressing emotions. Studies have shown effects similar to hypnosis for reducing anxiety and distress, as well as pain relief.
- *Relaxation techniques* – techniques used to help refocus attention to something calming. These can help anxiety and distress significantly. These techniques can also be used to reduce tension, depression, anger, and fatigue. Relaxation techniques may also help to improve sleep induction and maintenance
- *Music therapy* – the use of music to effect psychological, physical and social changes in individuals. This type of therapy has been used to increase relaxation and reduce anxiety.
- *Other forms of expressive arts* – this includes dance therapy, art therapy, journaling, and others. There is not much data to support these interventions as useful for particular effects. However, there are few risks associated with these therapies, and they may help you, so speak to your doctor about adding them to your routine.

Manipulative and body-based therapies

- *Massage* – pressure is applied to muscle and connective tissue to reduce tension and pain, improve circulation, and encourage relaxation. It can reduce anxiety, pain, fatigue, and distress. Massage is generally safe when practiced by credentialed practitioners. However, in work with individuals who have cancer, the practitioner should avoid deep or intense pressure, especially near lesions, enlarged lymph nodes, or postoperative changes. Individuals who have bleeding tendencies should receive only gentle massages with light touching.
- *Acupuncture* – the stimulation of specific points on the body to promote health, or to lessen disease symptoms and treatment side effects. Acupuncture has been shown to relieve both acute and chronic pain. The National Institutes of Health support the use of acupuncture for adult postoperative pain, chemotherapy-related nausea and vomiting, and postoperative dental pain.

Acupuncture appears to be effective against cancer-related pain, including neuropathic pain. Additionally, several reports have shown that acupuncture can stimulate saliva flow in patients with radiation-induced xerostomia (dry mouth). Acupuncture and acupressure can also help to lessen chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting.

Acupuncture is not recommended at the site of tumor or metastasis, in limbs with lymphedema, areas with distortion due to surgery, or for individuals with certain blood conditions. Individuals with cancer are encouraged to select acupuncture practitioners who are experienced in treating patients with malignant diseases.

- *Acupressure* – the application of manual pressure (usually with the fingertips) to specific points on the body. Wristbands that render continuous stimulation may help to prevent nausea on the day of chemotherapy treatment.

Diet and Dietary Supplements

- *Diet* – It is recommended that individuals interested in improving their diet obtain a referral to a registered dietitian in order to obtain guidelines on daily diets to promote basic health. It's common for people with cancer to have questions about different foods to eat during treatment. It's also important to know that there is no one food or special diet that has been proven to control cancer. Too much of any one food is not helpful, and may even be harmful. Because of the specific nutrition needs you may have, it's best to talk with the doctor in charge of your treatment about the foods you should be eating.
- *Supplements* - The use of certain supplements during treatment can cause problems due to drug-supplement interactions. Some plant-based products may also have adverse effects after surgery. It is recommended that dietary supplements, including both herbal products and megadoses of vitamins and minerals, be evaluated for side effects and potential interaction with other drugs. Those that are likely to interact with other drugs, including chemotherapeutic agents, should not be used concurrently with chemotherapy or radiation prior to surgery. Talk to your doctor and your pharmacist about any supplements you are thinking about taking.

Choosing a Practitioner

Choosing a complementary therapy practitioner should be done with the same care as choosing a doctor. Here are some suggestions to help you choose a practitioner:

- Ask your doctor or nurse to suggest someone.
- Ask whether someone at your cancer center or doctor's office can help you. There may be a social worker or physical therapist who can suggest someone.
- Contact professional organizations to get names of practitioners who are certified.
- Contact local health and wellness organizations.
- Ask about each practitioner's training and experience, especially about their experience in working with individuals who have cancer.
- Ask whether the practitioner has a license to practice in your state. If you want to confirm the answer, ask what organization gives out the licenses. Then, you may choose to follow up with a phone call.
- Call your health care plan to see if it covers your therapy.

References:

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