

For Chemo Patients, Virtual Reality Is a Welcome Distraction

Getting relief from stress and pain by imagining that you're somewhere else

July 24, 2019 By [Caroline Tien](#)

Thanks to virtual reality (VR) technology, people undergoing treatment for cancer can now go to the beach, play basketball or travel to a foreign country—all while hooked up to an IV.

“They’ve said that ‘It takes me out of the medical environment and puts me in a place of happiness. I was at peace,’” Fern Nibauer-Cohen, the director of patient engagement and business development for Penn Medicine’s department of radiation oncology, told The Daily Pennsylvanian, a University of Pennsylvania student publication.

Penn Medicine, part of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, is one of several hospital systems throughout the nation (including such big names as Dana-Farber and Brigham and Women’s) that has embraced VR as a means of mitigating the physical and psychological stress that often accompanies chemotherapy treatment. And mitigate it, it does. A 2017 study conducted by researchers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and published in the journal JMIR Mental Health found that VR experiences were associated with a greater decrease in pain levels than was simply watching a nature video at close range.

According to a Cedars-Sinai Medical Center press release about the study, Brennan Spiegel, one of the study’s authors, attributed the results to VR’s ability to cause “immersive distraction,” which describes a state of mind in which one stimulus is engaged at the expense of all others. Essentially, “virtual reality hijacks the senses, but in a good way,” he said, adding that it represents a plausible “drug-free supplement to traditional pain management.”

But VR’s potential medical applications aren’t limited to chemotherapy alone. The technology has also been used to treat such disparate conditions as posttraumatic stress disorder in soldiers who saw combat during the Iraq War and withdrawal in former opioid users. Such versatility has not escaped the notice of Goldman Sachs stockbrokers, who predict that the health care market for augmented and virtual reality experiences will reach \$5.1 billion by 2025.

You can read the Cedars-Sinai study [here](#).

