Oncologists Underestimate the Number of Breast Cancer Patients Who Use Complementary Medicine

Nearly three fourths of breast cancer patients employed one or more complementary therapies during treatment.

June 28, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Many more people who have breast cancer access complementary therapies than oncologists believe, according to new study results presented at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

“Cancer is a complex disease that affects every component of a patient’s life. While conventional medicine is effective for curing disease, it can fall short in helping patients heal,” said Wayne Jonas, MD, a study coauthor and the executive director of integrative health programs at the Samueli Foundation, according to The ASCO Post, the society’s publication.

Complementary medicine, also known as integrative medicine, refers to a range of practices that are used in conjunction with standard medical ones, according to the National Institutes of Health. These include yoga, tai chi, qi gong, meditation, mindfulness and acupuncture. (When these are employed instead of conventional medicine, by contrast, they are referred to as alternative medicine and are associated with poorer outcomes.)

While many of these practices have been shown to improve quality of life and health during and after cancer treatment, people with cancer need expert guidance to integrate them safely and effectively into their regimens. When oncologists fail to discuss complementary medicine with their patients, their patients often must resort to tracking down information and resources on their own.

"Many oncologists are generally supportive of integrating complementary and lifestyle therapies with conventional medical treatment, but the education and guidance given to patients varies widely," Terri Crudup, the study’s first author and the senior principal of primary intelligence at the data science company IQVIA, told The ASCO Post.

The new study involved national surveys that were administered to 115 clinical oncologists who treat breast cancer and 164 people with breast cancer who had been diagnosed less than two

years before. The surveys were conducted by IQVIA in late 2020, according to the Post.

The majority of patients (73%) surveyed reported accessing one or more types of complementary medicine in the wake of their diagnosis. By contrast, the majority of oncologists surveyed were under the impression that only a minority of patients (43%) did. The oncologists also revealed that they discussed complementary medicine with only roughly 50% of their patients.

Both populations saw the potential value of complementary medicine. The majority of oncologists (66%) and the majority of patients (65%) believed that accessing complementary medicine improved quality of life. In addition, the majority of patients (60%) thought that such treatments improved their health outcomes.

However, oncologists and patients occasionally disagreed on the effectiveness of specific practices. Perhaps as a result, patients reported that their oncologists provided fewer recommendations for spiritual services and meditation and mindfulness than they did for, say, nutrition consultations, support groups, psychological support and exercise.

The study also found that patients preferred learning about complementary medicine from their oncologists rather than from oncology nurses or patient navigators.

"Oncologists and the institutions at which they practice should look for methods to educate and expose patients to a variety of safe and effective complementary and lifestyle therapies to find the ones that will help their patients most," Crudup said, according to the Post.

For more on cancer patients and nontraditional medicine, read "People With Cancer Are Using Complementary Medicine—Without Telling Their Doctors."

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