Living With Cancer

Complementary Therapies

Many types of therapy may be used along with medical treatment for cancer to help manage symptoms and side effects. Many cancer centers now offer integrative therapy that combines clinically proven medical treatments and complementary approaches. Complementary therapies should be used only in addition to proven medical therapies, not as a replacement (which would be called alternative therapies).

Below are several complementary therapies widely used by people with cancer. They are generally intended to help manage side effects and improve overall well-being and quality of life. They are mostly safe, relatively inexpensive and do not interfere with the pharmacological effects of cancer medications. However, vitamins, supplements, herbs and other products can potentially be harmful and may interact with cancer medications. Talk to your cancer care team before starting any type of complementary therapy.

Acupuncture: This traditional Chinese therapy involves inserting thin needles into the skin at specific points on the body. Studies show that acupuncture may help ease pain and swelling after surgery. It may also help control side effects like nausea and vomiting during chemotherapy.

Aromatherapy: Scented oils can be inhaled or rubbed on the body during a massage. Research has shown that aromatherapy may help relieve symptoms like anxiety, depression and nausea in people with cancer.

Art therapy: Working with a trained art therapist to create pictures or objects with personal meaning can help people with cancer and their caregivers release bottled-up feelings. Studies show that art therapy can help people cope with illness and improve quality of life.

Biofeedback: This technique uses devices to train people to consciously regulate their body’s autonomic processes, such as respiration, blood pressure and heartbeat. Biofeedback may help people with cancer regain a sense of control over their bodies, and it can also reduce stress, pain and muscle tension.

Cannabis: Cannabis, also known as marijuana, and its chemical components (cannabinoids) have shown promise for relief of pain, nausea and loss of appetite in people with cancer. While some laboratory and animal studies have shown that cannabis slows the growth of cancer cells, it has not been proven as a cancer treatment in clinical trials. Marijuana is illegal at the federal level in the United States, more than half of the states now allow medical or recreational use of cannabis

or isolated cannabidiol.

Herbal therapies: Many plant components have demonstrated anti-cancer effects in laboratory and animal studies, and in fact, some widely used cancer drugs are derived from plants (such as vincristine, from a periwinkle). Some herbs can help manage side effects; for example, ginger and peppermint can relieve nausea. But plant materials have not been well studied in clinical trials. Herbal products sold over the counter are not always accurately labeled and some can be toxic or interfere with medical treatment.

Labyrinth walking: This ancient meditative practice involves walking along a set pathway that weaves in a circle around a central point. More than 100 health care facilities in the United States have labyrinths to help patients relieve stress, improve coordination and build strength.

Massage: Manipulating the muscles and rubbing the soft tissues of the body may help reduce cancer treatment side effects such as pain, fatigue and anxiety. Massage can also help improve the health of scar tissue and increase range of motion after surgery.

Meditation: Focusing attention on the breath and repetition of words (mantras) can help relieve stress and anxiety. Research shows that meditation can also have a positive effect on physiological processes and may help patients cope with the symptoms of cancer and other illnesses and side effects of treatment.

Music or dance therapy: In a music therapy session, a person with cancer might listen to music, dance, sing, write lyrics, perform with simple instruments or use guided imagery along with music. Sessions can help improve emotional and physical well-being and promote relaxation.

Qigong: An aspect of traditional Chinese medicine, qigong combines gentle movement, controlled breathing and meditation. It may help relieve stress and can be a good reintroduction to physical activity after surgery.

Spirituality: Studies show that people who rely on their faith throughout cancer treatment tend to have increased hope and optimism and a higher satisfaction with life. Further benefits of prayer and other spiritual practices may include decreased anxiety and depression and better ability to cope with discomfort.

Tai chi: This martial art is often referred to as a “moving meditation.” Practitioners perform a series of slow, graceful motions, concentrating on deep breathing and posture. Tai chi may help relieve pain, anxiety and stress for cancer patients and survivors.

Traditional medicine: Ayurveda (traditional Indian medicine) and traditional Chinese medicine are healing systems with multiple components including herbal therapies, diet, exercise, and

breathing or meditative practices. These systems have not been well tested in western clinical trials, but individual components (such as acupuncture) have shown benefits in some studies.

Vitamins and supplements: Many vitamins, antioxidants and other dietary supplements are promoted as immune boosters or treatments for cancer, but they have not been proven in clinical trials. Some people with cancer need vitamin or mineral supplements to correct deficiencies, but high doses don't offer additional benefits and can be harmful. Supplement products sold over the counter are not always accurately labeled and some may interfere with medical treatment.

Yoga: Moving through gentle yoga poses during cancer treatment can help increase blood and oxygen flow throughout the body while building and maintaining strength. Yoga can also help dissipate tension and anxiety, which studies show can suppress immune function.

For more information on complementary therapies, visit:

American Cancer Society

National Cancer Institute: Complementary and Alternative Medicine

National Cancer Institute: Cannabis and Cannabinoids

Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)

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