

Complementary medicine in palliative care and cancer symptom management.

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A literature review on complementary therapies for cancer, released by the National Center for Complementary & Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), gives a good overview of their potential for helping with treating cancer.. An important review of the literature on CAM therapies and cancer treatment was recently released by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

Generally speaking, reports of use vary by geographical area, gender, and disease diagnosis. Prevalence of CAM use among cancer patients in the United States has been reported at anywhere between 7% and 54%.

Most cancer patients use CAM with the hope of boosting the immune system, relieving pain, and controlling side effects related to disease or treatment. A minority of patients use these therapies to help with cure.

This particular review article focuses on botanicals, body work and manipulative practices, and energy medicine, because they are widely used as complementary approaches in palliative cancer care and cancer symptom management.

For symptom management, auricular acupuncture, therapeutic touch, and hypnosis (includes imagery) have been found to help manage cancer pain to varying degrees. Likewise, music therapy, massage, and hypnosis can have an effect on anxiety, and both acupuncture and massage may have a therapeutic role in cancer fatigue.

Acupuncture and selected botanicals can reduce chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, and hypnosis and guided imagery can be beneficial in anticipatory nausea and vomiting.

Transcendental meditation and the mindfulness-based stress reduction can play a role in the management of depressed mood and anxiety. Black cohosh and phytoestrogen-rich foods can reduce vasomotor symptoms in postmenopausal women.

The report asserts that most CAM approaches are safe when used by a CAM practitioner experienced in the treatment of cancer patients. The potential for many commonly used botanical to interact with prescription drugs continues to be a concern. Botanicals should be used with caution by cancer patients and only under the guidance of an oncologist knowledgeable in their use.

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