

Acupuncture: Role in Comprehensive Cancer Care

Acupuncture: Role in Comprehensive Cancer Care—A Primer for the Oncologist and Review of the Literature

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In recent studies, patients have reported an increased use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Acupuncture is a popular complementary therapy for patients with cancer. This article will provide current cancer treatment providers with information on acupuncture as well as the research conducted on cancer symptoms and side effects of cancer treatments. Antiemetic studies are the most prevalent and contain the most promising results. Several studies have found that acupuncture significantly reduces the number of emesis (vomiting) episodes for patients receiving chemotherapy. While studies on pain control vary due to the heterogeneity of pain, there are few studies investigating pain caused from cancer and the removal of cancerous tumors. These studies, while promising, provide basic results that need further investigation for more definitive results. Although relatively few studies have been done on anxiety and depression, several researchers have found acupuncture to be just as effective as or more effective than antidepressants for patients without cancer. Studies on breathlessness, while small, have shown acupuncture to have a significant positive effect on chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, breathlessness associated with end-stage cancer, and asthma. Researchers studying xerostomic individuals who have received salivary gland irradiation found significant positive results in salivary flow rates compared to baseline. Patients with hot flashes due to hormonal imbalance may benefit from the use of acupuncture. A recent pilot study showed improvement of chronic postchemotherapy fatigue following acupuncture treatments. Many individuals with cancer have turned to acupuncture because their symptoms persisted with conventional treatments or as an alternative or complement to their ongoing treatments. Despite the immense popularity in the community, few large randomized trials have been conducted to determine the effects acupuncture has on cancer symptoms and side effects of treatments. A majority of the current studies

have shown beneficial effects that warrant further investigation with large trial sizes.