

Complementary Therapies to Ease the Way during Cancer Treatment and Recovery

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The Integrative Medicine Service at Memorial offers complementary therapies. They are available to patients, family members, and staff. These can help control many symptoms and side effects. They can help keep you strong through treatment and recovery. Call us or visit the Center to learn more about:

- Acupuncture
- Music therapy
- Self-hypnosis
- Nutrition and herb counseling
- Yoga
- Fitness programs
- Massage therapy
- Meditation and other mind-body relaxation therapies

This booklet describes many of these therapies. It also suggests other things you can do on your own to help relieve symptoms. At the end of the booklet, we describe therapies that are unsafe or can harm you. We also tell you which ones can interfere with your cancer treatment. Be sure to read that section before you take any herbs or over-the-counter remedies. Let your doctor know if you plan to begin or are already taking herbs or other remedies.

Anxiety and Stress

Acupressure – Pressing a point on the inside of the wrist about two inches above the hand crease (about where your watch band is) can relieve nausea, anxiety, and stress. Keep the pressure on for a minute or two. Repeat the process on the other wrist. You can buy acupressure bands in drug stores and catalogs, but fingers do the job at least as well.

Aromatherapy – If you find that scents are calming, put a few drops of “essential oil” in your bath. You can use rosemary, lavender, or chamomile. You can buy these in health food stores and drug stores. Scented candles used in a relaxed setting can also help relieve anxiety or stress.

Meditation and other relaxation techniques – These allow you to take mini vacations in the mind. Close your eyes and see yourself in a pleasant, peaceful place. Breathe deeply and slowly. Or lie down with your eyes closed. Starting at the tip of your toes, consciously relax each body part as you gradually move up your body. Your body and mind will relax accordingly.

Music therapy – For many, music has important benefits. It can calm, distract, and soothe. You can consult with a music therapist, but you can do it yourself in a quiet place with a CD of the kind of music you find relaxing.

Massage therapy – This can help you feel calm and relaxed. It may help relieve some symptoms related to cancer. Many patients claim that a weekly massage greatly helped them get through their treatment. Look for a massage therapist who has worked with cancer patients. Or have a friend or family member gently massage your neck and shoulders, hands and feet. The Integrative Medicine Service offers a free one-hour course for family members and friends. It is called “Touch Therapy for Caregivers.” Call 646-888-0801 to learn more about it. The Integrative Medicine Service offers massage therapy in its outpatient center.

Yoga – Many believe that yoga brings the mind, body, and spirit together in a peaceful union. Take a class, rent a videotape, borrow a book, and practice. Do it along with deep breathing. Integrative Medicine offers yoga classes for patients and family members.

Depression

Light therapy – Bright-light boxes are made to reduce depression. They work well in northern parts of the world where sunlight is rare or during winter months in the Northern Hemisphere. Place the box at eye level on a desk or table. Light boxes are used by doctors. Psychiatrists use them to treat seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

Meditation and yoga – These can be helpful in treating depression, anxiety, and stress.

Tai Chi – An exercise program that you can do everyday. It combines gentle movements of the body with the benefits of meditation. Research shows that tai chi not only improves mood, but also reduces falls, improves balance, and increases strength.

Integrative Medicine offers several exercise classes. These are available to patients, family members, and the community.

Please note – St. John’s Wort is a commonly used anti-depressant herb. Patients receiving chemotherapy should not take St. John’s Wort. It interferes with some treatment drugs.

Nausea

Acupressure – Pressing the point inside your wrist two inches above the hand crease is said to relieve nausea. Press the fingers of one hand about one inch above the hand crease on the other hand. Use gentle pressure for a minute or two. This works for many people. Repeat as needed (see Anxiety). Integrative Medicine offers shiatsu and acupuncture for nausea and many other symptoms.

Peppermint tea

Ginger – Ginger is a natural remedy for nausea. Buy capsules or make tea by shaving fresh ginger into boiling water. Some people add sugar and gelatin to boiled ginger water. Let it cool, cut it into squares, and eat it as candy. Ginger ale and cookies made with real ginger are other alternatives. Do NOT use ginger for nausea if you have been told to avoid aspirin or if you are on a blood-thinner. Ginger may increase the risk of bleeding.

Chronic pain

Check with your doctor before you begin any pain remedy program. Your doctor should be aware of the type and source of your pain.

Acupuncture – Acupuncture is used for pain control. Look for a licensed, accredited acupuncturist. He or she should use sterile, disposable, stainless steel needles. You should feel little to no pain. The Integrative Medicine Acupuncture Program may be of assistance.

Biofeedback – Biofeedback can help you manage pain. It requires equipment and someone who is trained in the technique. Your doctor can make a referral. You can also call Integrative Medicine or check the phone book.

Self-Hypnosis – This is a deep form of meditation. It can reduce or stop chronic pain. Integrative Medicine Service meditation experts teach patients to use self-hypnosis.

Therapeutic massage – See Therapeutic massage under Anxiety and Stress.

Useful herbs – Several herbs have been discussed in other sections as used for particular symptoms. Many also are used in the treatment of pain.

- External capsicum (see Muscle Ache)
- Willow bark tea (see Muscle Ache - remember, you should not use this herb if you cannot take aspirin)

Muscle Ache

Hydrotherapy – A warm bath or Jacuzzi often helps soothe aching muscles.

Massage Therapy – Massage therapy may help reduce back or muscle aches. Look for a massage therapist who has worked with cancer patients. Or have a friend or family member gently massage the area that aches. A light touch is best for patients with cancer. Avoid deep pressure and do not touch areas of broken skin. Also do not touch areas that have ports, stomas, or other lines going into the body. Integrative Medicine offers massage therapy. It is available to patients, family members, and the community.

Capsicum cream – Capsaicin is a strong pain relieving substance found in hot red peppers. It is the active ingredient in many rub-on pain relievers. Use gloves to rub it on sore spots. (Capsicum can be irritating to the eyes, mucus membranes, or on open wound.) You can buy creams that contain capsaicin in pharmacies and health food stores.

Willow tea – The bark of the willow tree contains salicin, which is similar to aspirin. You can buy willow tea in health food shops. If aspirin upsets your stomach, or if you have been told not to use aspirin or products that have aspirin, do not drink willow tea. Do not give willow tea to children.

Headache

Acupressure – Pressing the point between the eyebrows or in the hollows at the base of the skull on both sides of the spine for a minute or two. This may relieve headache.

Relaxation techniques and massage – These may help relieve headaches as well as stress, anxiety, and depression.

Feverfew – This herb has been shown to reduce migraine attacks. Use it with caution if you are using any “blood-thinning” drugs.

Evening primrose tea – This tea also may help relieve headaches. Do NOT take it if you are a breast cancer patient on tamoxifen or raloxifene.

Constipation

The following natural products may help relieve constipation. Use only one item at a time. Do not take them with any other medicine for constipation.

Senna – The leaf of senna is an effective laxative. You can buy it as a tablet or a tea. Excessive use can cause nausea and abdominal cramps.

Plantago seed – Plantago seed, also called psyllium seed, is an herbal laxative. It should be taken with plenty of water. Do not take this herb if you have asthma.

Water and fiber – Drink six to eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day. Also include fiber, such as fruit, bran cereal, and prunes in your diet. Regular exercise also helps.

Colds and Flu

Echinacea – Some studies show that this herb may make a cold go away sooner. It does not make the symptoms better while you have the cold. You can buy Echinacea as a tea or capsule. Do not take it if you are allergic to ragweed, daisies, or sunflowers. Also do not take it if you are using an immunosuppressant agent.

Eucalyptus or peppermint oil – These products help clear stuffed sinuses when they are inhaled. You can put them in a humidifier.

Sleep Problems

Have a massage.

Meditate.

Relax in a warm bath scented with lavender oil.

You can also try tea made from passionflower herbs, chamomile, lemon balm, or valerian root.

Cautions and Warnings!

- **Do not** use herbs or other non-prescription remedies for children without checking with their doctor. Do not use them if you are pregnant or breast-feeding unless your cancer doctor tells you that it is safe.
- Stop all herbs one to two weeks before surgery. They may interact with anesthesia. They can also interfere with normal blood clotting.
- Avoid herbs if you are on chemotherapy. Some have serious interactions with chemo drugs.
- Ask your doctor about any herbs you are taking before you begin radiation therapy. Some sensitize the skin and may cause burns.

The following herbal products have serious toxic effects. Do not take them:

Aloe and Cascara – These laxatives can cause potassium loss if they are used often over time. They can be very dangerous when used with some heart drugs or water pills.

Chaparral tea – It is promoted as an antioxidant, pain reliever, etc. It has caused liver failure. Liver failure can lead to the need for a liver transplant.

Chasteberry – It is used for premenstrual syndrome. Animal studies suggest it may affect prescription drugs used for mental illnesses. Do not use it if you are on these medicines.

Comfrey – This herb has been linked to liver failure.

Kava – There have been reports of liver damage from this herb. The French, British, and Canadian governments warn consumers not to use it. The Food and Drug Administration has asked doctors in the U. S. to report cases of liver failure that may be caused by kava.

Licorice – This herb is used to treat peptic ulcers. It is also used as an expectorant. It should NOT be taken with certain heart medications.

Lobelia – Also known as Indian tobacco, lobelia causes vomiting. In high doses, it can cause coma and death. Lesser effects include rapid heartbeat and breathing problems.

Pau d'arco – This herb is used to treat cancer and infections. It contains toxic components and should NOT be used.

Pennyroyal – Drinking pennyroyal oil has caused death in women and infants. Do NOT take this herb.

St. John's Wort – St. John's Wort stops the body from using many drugs, including chemo. Do not take it with ANY prescribed drug.

Yohimbe – This herb is billed as a body builder and an “enhancer of male performance.” It has caused seizures, kidney failure, and death.

Additional Resources

For more information, go to: www.mskcc.org/AboutHerbs. Please ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist how to use complementary therapies safely during your cancer treatment. You may also call the Integrative Medicine Service at the numbers listed on page 1 of this booklet.