

Phone counseling improves quality of life, immune systems of cervical cancer survivors

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A unique telephone-counseling intervention not only improved the quality of life for cervical cancer survivors but also altered associated stress-related effects on their immune systems, a UC Irvine study has found.

Along with reporting psychological and social benefits, the women in the study were found to have improved anti-tumor immune responses. The findings point to the importance of a “mind-body” connection for surviving cancer with a higher quality of life.

“Cervical cancer survivors frequently experience profound and long-lasting quality of life issues, yet they often do not avail themselves of cancer support resources and are in desperate need of psychosocial interventions that work for them,” said Lari Wenzel, associate professor of medicine and public health at UC Irvine and co-lead author of the study. “This telephone-counseling strategy provided broad access to help women manage the stressors associated with cancer and its treatment.”

The researchers studied 50 women from September 2004 to December 2005 who had completed primary cervical cancer treatment at least six months before starting the counseling program. The standardized telephone counseling focused on stress and emotion management and health and wellness issues.

In addition to the patient-reported psychological and social effects of the study, the researchers looked at what can be called the “mind-body”

connection, which explores how behavioral interventions can affect other parts of the body.

Blood tests on the women who completed the counseling program showed a shift in the immune system, specifically with a class of T-helper immune cells, toward the type of immune response that seeks out and destroys tumor cells. Dr. Edward Nelson, UCI oncologist, tumor immunologist and co-lead author on the study, said the shift in these biomarkers was associated with the quality of life improvements that resulted from the telephone-counseling sessions helping participants address and relieve stress.

Previous studies have shown that chronic stress can hamper the immune system's ability to destroy tumor cells, Nelson said.

“Our counseling program is showing that stress reduction can positively influence cancer survivorship psychologically, socially and, potentially, medically.

“There is a great deal of public interest in the mind-body connection, and this study moves the field a step closer to identifying how psychosocial and complementary interventions might improve health outcomes.”

Nelson and Wenzel both stress that although their data identifies changes in health that should put the immune system in a better position to fight cancer, demonstration of any improvement in survival will require much larger studies with much longer follow-up. The researchers have received a \$3.1 million National Institutes of Health grant to study this in a larger population throughout Southern California.

The study appears in the April edition of *Clinical Cancer Research*. Wenzel is a researcher with the Center for Health Policy Research at

UCI. Nelson is a physician/scientist with its Center for Immunology. Both are members of the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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