

Cancer patients find relief in integrative medicine services

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The very instant Penny Kukovec was diagnosed with breast cancer her world permanently changed. Suddenly, it felt as if her life was out of her control. She felt powerless and overwhelmed. There were so many unanswered questions. Why me? What's next? What about my family? The feelings Kukovec experienced are felt by many cancer patients following their initial diagnosis and as they pursue treatment. In an effort to effectively and compassionately respond to these worries, as well as address common side effects associated with cancer treatment, Northwestern Memorial Hospital and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University now offer integrative oncology services.

"When a patient is diagnosed with [cancer](#) many of them want to fully participate in their recovery, but don't know where to begin. This program gives them control over their treatment," said Julian Schink, MD, chief of Gynecologic Oncology at Northwestern Memorial and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University.

The integrative oncology services are part of a larger 360 Care Program that recently launched aimed to address cancer patients' needs from every angle through treatment that extends beyond medical therapies, to include counseling, stress management and integrative medicine. Integrative oncology services include acupuncture, massage, energy healing and naturopathic medicine offered by Northwestern Memorial Physicians Group's Center for Integrative Medicine and Wellness.

"Our goal is to treat the whole person, not just their illness," said Melinda Ring, MD, medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine and Wellness. "Research suggests that a holistic approach can alleviate stress and anxiety, as well as the physical pain and discomfort patients often experience while undergoing cancer treatments by activating the body's innate healing process."

While there is little research to explain exactly how integrative approaches like acupuncture work, researchers at the National Institute of Health state complementary therapy such as acupuncture do improve the body's immune system. In an oncology setting, integrative approaches provide an effective way to manage symptoms, alleviate side effects, and help patients restore their sense of control and vitality.

"My body was hit hard with trauma. I was so tired, my joints hurt and my muscles were tense. I knew I needed more help. When I began massage therapy my muscles relaxed, and it helped me release my emotions. It reminded my body that it can relax in spite of what I am going through," said Penny Kukovec, patient at Northwestern Memorial.

Common side effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatment for cancer include muscle tension, aches, pains nausea, vomiting and fatigue. The main role of complementary medicine is to provide supportive care and reduce adverse effects while helping the patient cope.

"Unfortunately, the side effects associated with conventional therapies often cause patients to end their treatments prematurely, or require that we take a less aggressive approach," said Schink. "We've seen this occurrence decrease with the addition of integrative oncology services."

"The medicine I was taking for my cancer caused nerve damage in my hands and feet. It was very uncomfortable. Acupuncture helped relieve the pain," said Nancy Amicangelo, patient at Northwestern Memorial.

There is evidence that integrative approaches may also play a role in reducing the rate of depression among cancer patients. Services such as massage therapy are believed to have a short-term effect on reducing anxiety related to depression among patients.

"You're sick, your hair falls out, and your family is stressed. When you are diagnosed it's sometimes all that you can think about. The massages offer me a chance to escape," said Kukovec.

While integrative medicine does not offer a cure for cancer, there is strong evidence that it positively affects the patient. Studies show 77 percent of cancer patients who incorporate complementary approaches believe it improves their quality of life, and 73 percent state it makes them feel hopeful. In addition, 71 percent say it helps to boost their immune system.

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital

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