

MSU researcher linking breast cancer patients with alternative therapies

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Biological-based therapies such as diet supplements and vitamins are the most popular complementary and alternative medicines for women recovering from breast cancer, according to a Michigan State University researcher working to create a support intervention for women in treatment for the disease.

Gwen Wyatt of MSU's College of Nursing, in research published in the current edition of *Nursing Research*, analyzed which CAM therapies — such as massage, supplements and reflexology — are used the most and why. She looked at the five major categories of therapies: biological, mind-body, manipulative and body, energy and alternative medical systems.

"Quality of life is a research priority for the National Institutes of Health as it pertains to breast cancer," Wyatt said. "Patients link symptoms to quality of life; if you have to live with breast cancer, then let's have the highest quality of life we can during the process and make it as humane as possible."

She found that 57 percent of [women](#) are using CAM therapies, and the sicker a woman is the more likely she is to use multiple therapies. Besides biological-based therapies, the next most popular were mind-body therapies using audiotapes, video and music therapy. More than 200 women were part of the study.

"The more popular therapies selected might be rationalized by women

viewing these categories as more closely aligned with their health care provider's recommendations," Wyatt said.

She is using the results of the study, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, to help women identify which therapies will be most effective for them. CAM therapies have gained widespread use in the past decade; Wyatt is currently funded by the NIH with a \$3.1 million grant to study the effects of reflexology — a specialized foot therapy that applies firm pressure to certain parts of the sole of the foot — on symptom management and quality of life for women with breast cancer.

Among her other findings:

- The therapies with the highest mean spending (acupuncture and therapeutic touch at \$45) were used by very few women, while vitamins, massage and homeopathy had an average total spending of \$19.78 to \$38.54 and were frequently used.
- Women without at least some college education were less likely to use CAM therapies.
- Employed women were more likely to use different types of therapies.
- Women reported greater use of therapies that required fewer sessions.

With research findings in hand, Wyatt is working with Darcy Greene from the College of Communications Arts and Sciences and Alla Sikorskii from the Department of Statistics and Probability to create a decision support intervention for women newly diagnosed with breast

cancer and those recovering from surgery. It will include a DVD and booklet, outlining therapies and their safety and effectiveness.

"Women are using these therapies, but they have little education about safety and efficacy," Wyatt said. "One report indicates up to 80 percent of women diagnosed with [breast cancer](#) are using CAM therapies."

"They could really benefit from information on how to make a wise decision and choose the best therapies."

Provided by Michigan State University

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