

Yoga improves quality of life in women with breast cancer undergoing radiation therapy

May 18 2011

For women with breast cancer undergoing radiation therapy, yoga offers unique benefits beyond fighting fatigue, according to new research from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

While simple stretching exercises improved fatigue, patients who participated in yoga that incorporated yogic breathing, postures, meditation and relaxation techniques into their treatment plan experienced improved physical functioning, better general health and lower cortisol (stress hormone) levels. They also were better able to find meaning in their cancer experience.

The findings, to be presented next month in an oral session at the 47th annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology by Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D., professor and director of the Integrative Medicine Program at MD Anderson, are the latest in an ongoing effort to scientifically validate the age-old belief that mind-body interventions have a beneficial impact on the health of cancer patients. The research was conducted in collaboration with India's largest yoga research institution, Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana in Bangalore, India.

The study assessed, for the first time, yoga benefits to cancer patients by comparing their experience with patients in an active control group who integrated simple, generic stretching exercises into their lives. "The combination of mind and body practices that are part of yoga clearly have tremendous potential to help patients manage the psychosocial and

physical distress associated with treatment and life after cancer, beyond the benefits of simple stretching," said Cohen.

To conduct the study, 163 women with breast cancer (stage 0-3) averaging 52 years of age were randomized to one of three groups: 1) yoga; 2) simple stretching; or 3) no instruction in yoga or stretching. Participants in the yoga and stretching groups attended sessions specifically tailored to breast cancer patients for one hour three days a week throughout their six weeks of radiation treatment.

Participants were asked to report on their quality of life, including fatigue, daily functioning, benefit finding, depression and spirituality. Saliva samples were collected and electrocardiogram tests were administered at baseline, end of treatment, and at one, three and six months post-treatment.

After completing radiation treatment, only the women in the yoga and stretching groups reported a reduction in fatigue. At one, three and six months after radiation therapy, women who practiced yoga during the treatment period reported greater benefits to physical functioning and general health. They were more likely to perceive positive life changes from their cancer experience than either other group.

Women who practiced yoga also had the steepest decline in their cortisol across the day, indicating that yoga had the ability to regulate this stress hormone. This is particularly important because higher stress hormone levels throughout the day, known as a blunted circadian cortisol rhythm, have been linked to worse outcomes in breast cancer.

According to Cohen, developing a yoga practice also helps patients after completing cancer treatment. "The transition from active therapy back to everyday life can be very stressful as patients no longer receive the same level of medical care and attention. Teaching patients a mind-body

technique like yoga as a coping skill can make the transition less difficult."

Through a grant from the National Cancer Institute – the largest ever awarded for the study of yoga in cancer – Cohen and his team will next conduct a Phase III clinical trial in women with breast cancer to further determine the mechanisms of yoga that lead to improvement in physical functioning, quality of life, and biological outcomes during and after radiation treatment. A secondary aim of the trial, but one of great importance, stressed Cohen, is assessing cost efficiency analysis for the hospital, health care usage costs in general, and examining work productivity of patients.

MD Anderson recognizes the growing body of research indicating that relaxation-based interventions can contribute to the well-being of people with cancer. Through the Integrative Medicine Program, complementary therapies, such as yoga, are offered at MD Anderson's Integrative Medicine Center, and are used in concert with mainstream care to manage symptoms, relieve stress, enhance quality of life, and improve outcomes for patients and their caregivers. MD Anderson's Integrative Medicine faculty also conduct research in the biological and behavioral effects of mind-body based interventions; the anti-cancer potential of natural compounds; and, acupuncture to treat common cancer treatment-related side effects.

Provided by University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center

Citation: Yoga improves quality of life in women with breast cancer undergoing radiation therapy (2011, May 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-05-yoga-breast-cancer-patients.html>

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