

Using alternative medicine only for cancer linked to lower survival rate

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Patients who choose to receive alternative therapy as treatment for curable cancers instead of conventional cancer treatment have a higher risk of death, according to researchers from the Cancer Outcomes, Public Policy and Effectiveness Research (COPPER) Center at Yale

School of Medicine and Yale Cancer Center. The findings were reported online by the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*.

There is increasing interest by [patients](#) and families in pursuing alternative medicine as opposed to conventional [cancer](#) treatment. This trend has created a difficult situation for patients and providers. Although it is widely believed that conventional cancer treatment will provide the greatest chance at cure, there is limited research evaluating the effectiveness of alternative medicine for cancer.

While many cancer patients use [alternative therapy](#) in addition to conventional cancer treatments, little is known about patients who use alternative therapy as their only approach to treating their cancer.

"We became interested in this topic after seeing too many patients present in our clinics with advanced cancers that were treated with ineffective and unproven alternative therapies alone," said the study's senior author, James B. Yu, M.D., associate professor of therapeutic radiology at Yale Cancer Center.

To investigate alternative medicine use and its impact on survival compared to conventional cancer treatment, the researchers studied 840 patients with breast, prostate, lung, and [colorectal cancer](#) in the National Cancer Database (NCDB)—a joint project of the Commission on Cancer of the American College of Surgeons and the American Cancer Society. The NCDB represents approximately 70% of newly diagnosed cancers nationwide. Researchers compared 280 patients who chose alternative medicine to 560 patients who had received conventional cancer treatment.

The researchers studied patients diagnosed from 2004 to 2013. By collecting the outcomes of patients who received alternative medicine instead of chemotherapy, surgery, and/or radiation, they found a greater

risk of death. This finding persisted for patients with breast, lung, and colorectal cancer. The researchers concluded that patients who chose treatment with alternative medicine were more likely to die and urged for greater scrutiny of the use of alternative medicine for the initial treatment of cancer.

"We now have evidence to suggest that using [alternative medicine](#) in place of proven cancer therapies results in worse survival," said lead author Skyler Johnson, M.D. "It is our hope that this information can be used by patients and physicians when discussing the impact of cancer [treatment](#) decisions on survival."

Cary Gross, M.D., co-author of the study, called for further research, adding, "It's important to note that when it comes to alternative cancer therapies, there is just so little known—patients are making decisions in the dark. We need to understand more about which treatments are effective—whether we're talking about a new type of immunotherapy or a high-dose vitamin—and which ones aren't, so that patients can make informed decisions."

Henry Park, M.D., MPH, was also a study author.

Provided by Yale University

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