

Tibetan yoga practice may improve sleep quality for breast cancer patients receiving chemotherapy

September 20 2017

Participating in twice-weekly practice of Tibetan yoga may reduce sleep disturbances and improve sleep quality in breast cancer patients receiving chemotherapy, according to a study from researchers at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

The research, published in the journal *Cancer*, found that women who practiced Tibetan yoga at least two times a week reported less daytime disturbances, better [sleep quality](#) and sleep efficiency over time, compared to those practicing less often and to women in an active control group receiving usual care.

Sleep disturbances and fatigue are two of the most frequent and debilitating side effects experienced by cancer [patients](#) undergoing chemotherapy, explained lead author Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D., professor of Palliative, Rehabilitation, and Integrative Medicine and director of the Integrative Medicine Program. Patients often describe poor sleep quality, insomnia, and excessive drowsiness.

"Previous research has established that yoga effectively reduces sleep disturbances for [cancer patients](#), but have not included active control groups or long-term follow-up," said Cohen. "This study hoped to address previous study limitations."

For the randomized study, 227 women with stage I-III breast [cancer](#)

undergoing chemotherapy at MD Anderson Cancer Center were randomized to one of three groups: a Tibetan yoga program, a simple-stretching program, or a waitlist control group receiving usual care. Participants in the Tibetan yoga program and the stretching program attended four 75-90 minute classes during their chemotherapy treatment.

Participants in the Tibetan yoga program were taught one-on-one by a trained instructor, with each class focusing on controlled breathing, visualization, meditation and postures. Patients were encouraged to practice daily, at home outside of class.

Prior to starting the interventions, participants completed baseline questionnaires and wore an actigraphy watch, which monitors rest and activity cycles, 24 hours a day for seven days to assess sleep quality. Follow-up assessments were conducted one week after the end of intervention and three, six, and 12 months later.

Sleep disturbances and fatigue were assessed using the self-reported Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index and the Brief Fatigue inventory. Participants also wore actigraphs 24 hours a day for seven days at each study time point to measure sleep.

There were no statistically significant group differences in total [sleep disturbances](#) or fatigue levels over time, but participants in the Tibetan yoga group reported fewer daily disturbances one week post-treatment than either of the other groups.

Additionally, long-term sleep benefits emerged over time for those who practiced Tibetan yoga at least two times a week. Compared to those who practiced less often, these patients reported fewer daily disturbances three months post-treatment, as well as better sleep quality and efficiency at six months post-treatment. These patients also reported fewer daily disturbances three months and better sleep efficiency six

months relative to the usual care [control group](#).

"While the effects of this intervention were modest, it is encouraging to see that the women who practiced yoga outside of class had improved sleep outcomes over time," said Cohen.

The study and findings were limited by several factors, including a lack of blinded group assignments and challenges with recruiting patients undergoing chemotherapy, resulting in just a 56 percent participation rate.

Planned future research will focus on shorter in-class instruction and increasing patient engagement in [yoga](#) practice outside of the instructional classes.

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

Citation: Tibetan yoga practice may improve sleep quality for breast cancer patients receiving chemotherapy (2017, September 20) retrieved 15 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-tibetan-yoga-quality-breast-cancer.html>

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