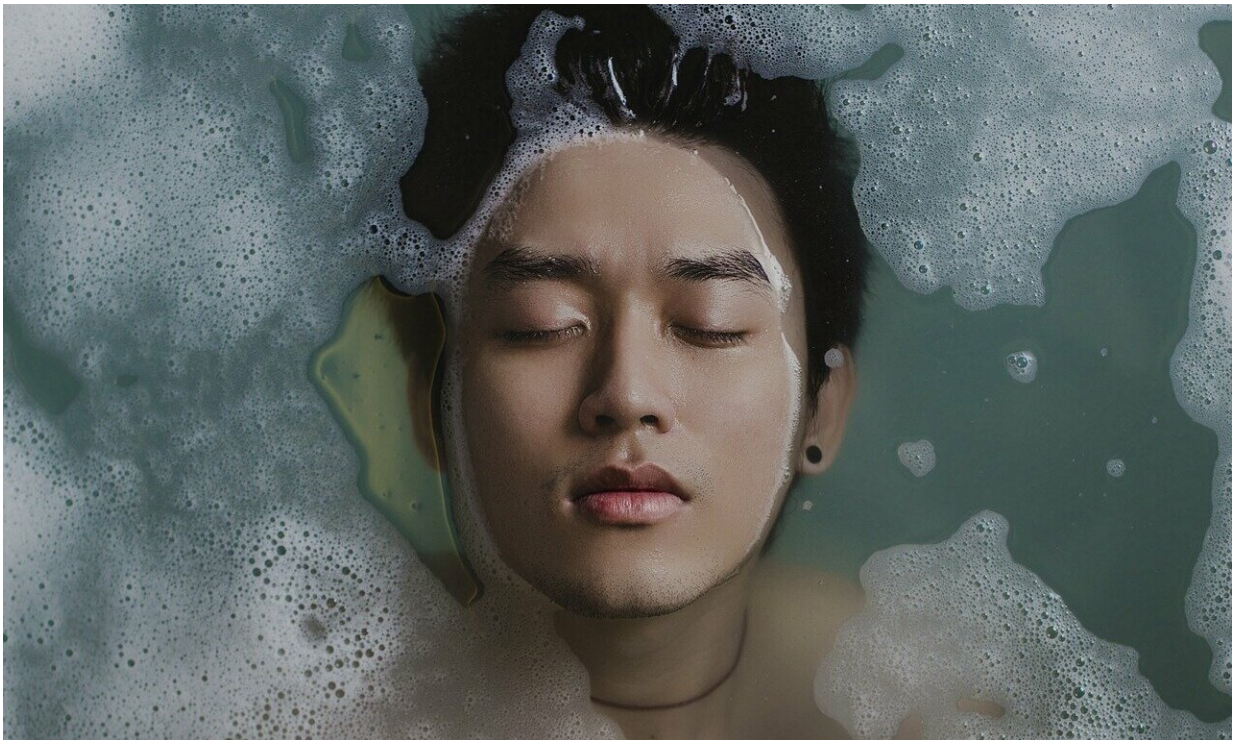


Spa-like treatments ease symptoms in cancer patients

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Until last year, Charlie Yommer would not have considered treating himself to a facial. That was before the cancer.

In mid-2017, doctors discovered Yommer, 58, had [prostate cancer](#). Then came a bladder [cancer](#) diagnosis the following June. The second

diagnosis, a more aggressive cancer, meant Yommer, a Garrett County resident, was driving nearly three hours one-way to Johns Hopkins Hospital for chemotherapy sessions. But the day before his treatments, Yommer makes a stop at the Four Seasons Baltimore.

Yommer is among the growing score of patients turning to spa-like treatments to ease their cancer symptoms. Facials, acupuncture and massage may seem more suited for spa clients looking to be pampered, but studies show such treatments can relieve pain, reduce swelling and improve patients' outlook in ways traditional medicine sometimes can't.

Although such services are available at hospitals such as the University of Maryland Medical Center and Mercy Medical Center, the spa at the Four Seasons is among the latest non-medical settings in Baltimore to offer a facial designed for clients with cancer. The Harbor East spa in 2018 began offering the Harmony Cancer Care Facial, a regimen by IS Clinical designed to hydrate and rejuvenate patients' skin.

Yommer said the benefits go beyond the serums and masks applied to his face.

"Being a [cancer patient](#), there's just so much more than just the cancer itself. It's thought process, the unknown. This is very relaxing," Yommer said. "The radiation or the chemo treatments dries you out. Your skin gets red in different spots. And this helps hydrate the skin. You feel like a new person. It takes that irritation away, the inflammation, and it's 25 minutes of relaxation and enjoyment."

While there's little scientific evidence backing benefits of facials in cancer treatment, literature supports the positive effects of treatments like massage and acupuncture in cancer patients, said Dr. Elizabeth Nichols, director of the University of Maryland Department of Radiation Oncology. She said those options are being more widely

accepted and promoted by physicians as part of cancer care.

"In the cancer community, there just overall is an increasing focus on the benefit of integrative therapies, and so I think this is something that's definitely here to stay. It's not a fad," she said.

Nichols has watched patients who have undergone acupuncture reduce or eliminate their pain medications, and she's seen others suffering from chemotherapy-induced nausea have their symptoms fade.

Donna Chang, a nurse and esthetician who heads the Mercy Medispa, agreed acupuncture treats a range of symptoms.

"Whatever you're going through—any kind of side effect from chemotherapy and/or stress-related—acupuncture is excellent for that," she said.

As for massage, the technique has been shown to reduce pain, fatigue and lymphedema, the swelling in arms and legs cancer patients sometimes experience due to fluid buildup in the lymphatic system.

"The way that we think about oncology massage is it's a specialized focus," said Mary Aguilera-Titus, a massage therapist who works at Suburban Hospital and Sibley Memorial Hospital, both in the Hopkins network. "You need to adjust your massage according with each specific person."

Massage therapists use many of the same techniques on cancer patients that they would in standard massages, but they take into account factors like blood counts and bone density, and adjust the speed, direction and placement of the massage to minimize discomfort.

"The whole point is to not make a bigger demand on their body, mind,

spirit," Aguilera-Titus said. "The treatment is already demanding."

Nichols, who specializes in breast and gynecologic radiation oncology, and she encourages conversations about alternative therapies with her patients, who she said are increasingly interested in complementing their care with non-traditional medicine. Those therapies are readily accessible at the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine, where Nichols encourages patients to seek a consultation at minimum.

"A lot of my breast cancer patients will bring it up to me in conversation without me having to ask about it," Nichols said.

But she doesn't push alternative medicine on patients unless they're open to it.

"I always tell my patients, if you're just one of those people that, no matter what, you're not going to believe in it, then I don't know that it's worth trying it because I think if you kind of go into it with a closed mind, it's hard to see the benefit," Nichols said. "But certainly if you have an open mind I do think it can be very beneficial."

Yommer opened his mind to the idea of adding regular facials to his cancer treatment when his niece, Cristy Brenneman, broached the idea. Brenneman is the only esthetician at the Four Seasons certified to provide the Harmony Cancer Care Facial, which uses medical-grade botanical ingredients designed to hydrate and soothe dry, irritated skin—a common side effect of chemotherapy.

"This is strictly result-driven, not pampering, where other facials that we do offer do give you results. But these are instant and more for people who are having skin conditions, irritations, things like that," Brenneman said.

Clad in a plush robe, Yommer lays down on a heated bed at the Four Seasons Spa, where Brenneman begins the facial. She gently traces his white goatee with gloved hands, spending 25 minutes applying creams, serums and masks packed with vitamins, anti-inflammatory elements and sun-protective properties.

Her uncle remarks on his glow after the treatment ends.

"You went extra heavy on the anti-aging, didn't you?" he jokes.

Since the Four Seasons began offering the facial last year, Brenneman has treated six [cancer patients](#) to positive reviews—their skin is more radiant, redness is reduced and they're more relaxed, she said.

"A lot of my patients say that they feel a cooling sensation to their skin," she said. "Gratitude, happy, yeah—I think that's the second-most important thing."

Patients, meanwhile, have to be careful that alternative therapies they seek don't negatively interfere with their other treatments. With the Harmony Cancer Care Facial, for instance, estheticians skip traditional facial elements like extractions, steaming and facial massage to reduce the risk of further irritating the skin and spreading toxins.

Acupuncture and massage carry their own risks. Acupuncture can lead to infections and should not be used on patients with low white blood cell counts. And massage should not be applied immediately after surgery, or near tumor sites.

"I most assuredly don't want people to come in and have us see them only as a person with cancer—they're much more than that," Aguilera-Titus said. "But at the same time I want to make sure we're providing something safe and effective."

That's why Nichols tries to open conversations about alternative treatments with patients who might seek them outside hospitals.

"There can be some negative interactions with what we're trying to do for the patient," Nichols said. "If we don't ask about it, the patients are going to do it anyways, and so we may as well know about it so we can work with the [patients](#) in the safest way possible."

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