

Complementary and alternative medicine for cancer: 20 questions and answers

Dr Andrew Vickers of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, answers the most commonly asked questions on Complementary and Alternative Therapies.

1. What is the difference between “alternative” and “complementary” medicine?

"Alternative" therapies usually aim to cure cancer or improve survival and are promoted for use instead of mainstream therapy. "Complementary" therapies are used as adjuncts to mainstream care for symptom management and to enhance quality of life. An example of an alternative therapy is the Gonzalez regime: this involves the use of vitamins and pancreatic enzymes and is intended for use instead of chemotherapy. An example of a complementary therapy is massage, which is widely used by cancer patients to help anxiety, depression and pain and improve overall well-being.

2. What are the complementary treatments?

There are several different types of complementary treatment. Some, such as massage, hypnosis and relaxation therapy, aim to reduce anxiety and increase feelings of well-being. This can improve symptoms such as pain or nausea. Others, such as yoga and tai chi, also aim to induce relaxation, but also involve gentle exercise. Acupuncture is widely used to treat pain and nausea, although practitioners say that it can help various other symptoms. There is good evidence that these sorts of treatments can help ease some of the troubling side effects of cancer and cancer treatment. Herbs and vitamins are also often described as complementary treatments. Cancer patients often take herbs and vitamins in an effort to fight cancer, rather than just treat cancer symptoms. As yet, there is not good evidence that herbs or vitamins help, and some have been shown to do harm.

3. I am just starting cancer treatment. It all seems so passive: lying still while getting an infusion or receiving radiation. Is there anything I can do to participate in my healing process?

Most cancer centres have trained nutritionists, physical therapists and other health professionals who can advise you about diet, exercise and rehabilitation after cancer treatment. Some complementary therapies, such as yoga and tai chi, involve gentle exercise that can help cancer patients. Relaxation techniques also require a patient's active participation. Such treatments seem to improve well-being, and may help treat some of the side-effects of conventional therapy.

4. I have read about a special cancer centre on the Internet. They use diet, herbs and vitamins instead of chemotherapy and radiation. Could it help me?

There are numerous 'alternative' cancer clinics in operation all over the world. These claim to be able to treat cancer using treatments that sound more 'natural' and gentle than those used in conventional medicine. The therapies used in such clinics are often based on unusual principles. For example, one alternative cancer centre is based on the idea that cancer is caused by a particular bacterium. Not only is this hard to square with current

understandings of how cancer develops but the bacterium concerned is not one that has been described by other scientists. Another cancer centre states that cancer is caused by the lack of a vitamin called “B17”. No conventional study of human nutrition has ever found such a vitamin. There is generally no scientific evidence that alternative cancer treatments actually help patients. Indeed, where studies have been conducted, alternative therapies were shown to have no effect on how long patients lived and they sometimes led to poorer quality of life. Remember also that visiting an alternative cancer clinic typically involves considerable expense, travel and time away from loved ones.

5. A friend has told me about a herbal medicine for cancer. Should I use it?

Many herbal and other folk medicines have been promoted as cancer treatments. Some of these, such as Laetrile, are known not to be of benefit. Some other herbs have shown effects on cancer in the test tube or in animals, but with a few exceptions these have yet to be tested in humans. The most important point is that herbal medicines should be avoided during, and for a few weeks before, treatment with chemotherapy or radiation: it is possible that herbs can interfere with conventional treatments by making them more toxic or less effective.

6. Could eating a special diet help fight cancer?

It is known that eating a healthy diet can help to prevent cancer. Current recommendations are that we eat a diet high in vegetables, fruits and fibre and low in animal fats and alcohol. There are no good reasons to believe, however, that any special diet can help treat cancer or prevent its recurrence. Indeed, some of the diets promoted as “cancer cures” are inappropriate for cancer patients because they are bulky and difficult to digest. Cancer centres have nutritionists who are trained in the special dietary needs of cancer patients.

7. Is it true that high doses of vitamins, like vitamin C, can cure cancer?

A number of studies have been conducted on “megadose” vitamin C therapy for cancer. These failed to show that vitamin C can improve survival. Many cancer patients take a general multivitamin supplement to help ensure adequate nutrition. Such supplements should not be taken during or for a few days before chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Some vitamins help protect cells from damage and so may actually prevent treatment from killing cancer cells.

8. I have read on a “cancer options” website that chemotherapy is largely ineffective for cancer. Why is my doctor suggesting chemotherapy?

Proponents of alternative medicine clearly do not like cancer chemotherapy. Unfortunately for patients, they present their arguments in somewhat misleading ways. For example, they may say that chemotherapy is not effective for breast cancer. This is misleading because chemotherapy tends not to be used on its own, but rather as an “adjuvant” to treatments such as surgery. Similarly, though it has been proven to extend life in the advanced stage of many cancers, chemotherapy rarely leads to cures in these patients. Alternative medicine proponents turn “does not cure” into “does not work” and again suggest that chemotherapy is ineffective. Attacks on chemotherapy by alternative medicine proponents tend to be poorly researched and misleading. They tend to rely heavily on anecdote. Alternative medicine books and websites are probably poor sources of information on chemotherapy.

9. What can I do to boost my immune system?

It seems logical that boosting the immune system would help it attack cancer cells. Perhaps surprisingly, however, immunity has a less important role in cancer than is widely thought. There is, for example, no reason to believe that people who get cancer have weakened immune systems compared to those to remain cancer free. Worrying about immunity is probably not something that should be a priority for cancer patients.

10. I am feeling very stressed and anxious. What might help me feel better in myself?

Many complementary therapies help reduce stress and anxiety. These include treatments such as massage, and techniques that involve patients more actively, such as relaxation therapy or hypnosis. The differences between complementary therapies are probably not very important: you should simply choose the therapy you find most appealing.

11. What can I do to reduce the toxic effects of chemotherapy and radiation?

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy are meant to be toxic. It is probable that any attempts you might make to reduce the toxicity of therapy would protect cancer cells as well as healthy body cells. Certain side effects of treatment, such as nausea and pain can be helped by some complementary therapies.

12. Can any complementary therapies help with hot flushes?

The best current evidence is that herbal medicines do not help with hot flushes. Some herbal medicines, such as soy products, contain oestrogen-like substances and it might be that if they helped hot flushes they might also promote the growth of breast cancer. Preliminary evidence suggests that both acupuncture and relaxation therapy can help prostate and breast cancer patients with hot flushes. Vitamin E has been shown to have a mild effect, perhaps reducing hot flush frequency by one hot flush a day. Because vitamin E is inexpensive and does not cause side-effects, some authorities recommend taking 800IU vitamin E daily to treat mild or moderate hot flushes.

13. The chemotherapy has left me feeling exhausted: are there any therapies that could improve my energy level?

Fatigue is a very common symptom in cancer patients but there is unfortunately little research to suggest what treatments might help, conventional or otherwise. It is thought that gentle exercise (including perhaps yoga or tai chi) can be of benefit. It is also thought that treatments that improve overall mood can help fatigue: massage and relaxation therapies have helped some patients feel less fatigued.

14. What treatments could help my pain, apart from drugs?

Therapies that induce relaxation often reduce pain. Many complementary therapies help people feel more relaxed and there is evidence that massage, hypnosis and relaxation therapy can help cancer pain. The effect does seem to be short-term, so these therapies have to be practised or received on a regular basis. Acupuncture is a well-known pain treatment, but its use with cancer patients has not been sufficiently studied.

15. I have heard that “visualizing” my body fighting cancer can help. What is “creative visualization”? Can it fight my cancer?

“Creative visualization” and “guided imagery” are techniques that involve the induction of a relaxed state followed by use of a visual image. Often the image is that of, say, a quiet clearing in a forest, and the idea is to help relaxation. There is evidence that such techniques are helpful for anxiety and pain. However, some people believe that a very different set of images can help treat cancer directly. Patients are asked to imagine their body killing cancer, for example, by seeing the cells of their immune system as sharks and their cancer as small fishes, or by using an image of spaceships and lasers. There have not been studies that show such techniques to improve survival in cancer. Whilst few would deny a link between mind and body, it does not seem particularly realistic to think that simply imagining a scene would somehow cause it to happen in the body.

16. I read an article about the links between the mind and body. It suggested that having the right attitude can make a difference in cancer. Is this true?

Some studies seem to show that getting or surviving cancer is associated with particular personality types or attitudes. These studies have been widely publicized, particularly in books on “mind-body medicine”. However, many studies have failed to find a link between mental characteristics and cancer, and taken as a whole, the scientific literature does not suggest that personality or attitude has an important effect on the course of cancer. One important study examined a special programme that aimed to teach cancer patients to have the best attitude to overcome cancer. Patients on the programme did not live longer than those who did not attend. All sorts of people get cancer and all sorts of people die from it. Cancer patients are probably not best served by worrying whether being the wrong sort of person or thinking the wrong sort of thought could affect their cancer.

17. Could my cancer have been caused by stress?

Although it is widely believed that stress can cause certain diseases, the best evidence is that stress is not associated with cancer. One study, for example, compared parents whose children were diagnosed with cancer, undoubtedly a very stressful experience, with parents of healthy children. There was no difference in cancer rates between the two groups.

18. A website I was reading says that there are effective alternative treatments for cancer but that these have been suppressed because so many companies make so much money from cancer. Is there a conspiracy against alternative medicine?

It is true that a great deal of money is involved in cancer treatment. But having a motive for a crime, such as suppressing scientific data, is not, by itself, evidence that a crime has been committed. Despite claiming that they are victims of a conspiracy, proponents of alternative cancer therapy typically do not provide any supporting evidence. Unlike, say, the case of the tobacco industry, there are no incriminating memos, unpublished research data or supporting statements from scientists.

19. Should I tell my doctor I am using a complementary or alternative medicine?

It is in fact very important to do so. You and your doctor need to plan your cancer care

together, and to do so effectively you need to communicate openly. Patients are sometimes frightened that their doctor will be angered or dismissive, but most doctors are very experienced, and open minded, in dealing with this issue.

20. I was taking a herbal medicine for a health problem I had before I was diagnosed with cancer. Is it safe to carry on taking the herb?

Herbal medicines should be avoided during, and for a few weeks before, treatment with chemotherapy or radiation: it is possible that herbs can interfere with conventional treatments by making them more toxic or less effective.

Resources

For general resources on complementary and alternative medicine for cancer see [Macmillan Cancer Support](#).

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