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## Reflexology and cancer

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## ABSTRACT

Reflexology is a complementary alternative medicine procedure carried out by applying pressure to specific points located mostly in the feet (sometimes in the hands), with intent to provide relief from certain symptoms. In reflexology thought to have a history of approximately 5000 years, it is believed that specific points in the feet are linked to certain organs and systems in the body, through energy channels, and that applying pressure to these points provides relief in the relevant organ and system, as well. However, no evidence has yet to be found that proves the alleged connections and mechanisms of reflexology. Indeed, studies carried out up to date were focused on the symptomatic effects of reflexology, rather than such links and mechanisms. In some studies, certain positive results have been obtained especially in terms of pain and anxiety. However, these studies were methodologically incomplete, as well, due to challenges such as the difficulty in creating blinding and placebo effect. As a result, currently we have no reliable evidence about the use of reflexology in any clinical situation. Nevertheless, when it is considered to be a safe procedure in terms of unwanted effects, it can be provided to patients as a supportive care service.

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## 1. Introduction

Complementary and alternative medicine procedures find place in the lives of cancer patients ever-increasingly, in a controlled or uncontrolled manner.<sup>1</sup> According to data obtained from surveys conducted in Europe; approximately 36% of cancer patients try complementary alternative medicinal procedures.<sup>2</sup> Reflexology, among the manipulative and body-based practices, is one of the 6 most commonly used complementary medicine procedures in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Reflexology is a complementary medicine procedure based on the principle of providing relaxation and healing by systematically applying pressure to specific reflex points mostly located in the feet but also in the hands, depending on some other practices. In this procedure, it is believed that some energy channels pass through certain points in the feet, and that when pressure is applied to these points, the blocked channels are unblocked in such a way as to restore the balance in the corresponding organs, glands or systems.<sup>4</sup> Besides these, some reflexologists assert that sensibility or

gritty tissues felt by palpation in the reflex areas of the feet indicate an imbalance in organs or systems; in other words, this procedure is also a diagnostic procedure.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1).

Until now, there have been many published studies on the use of reflexology for various health problems. However, there is no up-to-date and adequate compilation studies on its use especially in cancer patients. For this reason, this study was intended for providing an extensive evaluation of clinical trials carried out on the effects of reflexology practices on cancer patients, as well as the evidentiary values of such studies.

## 2. History

Despite the assertion that the treatment involving the application of pressure to the hands and feet was invented 5000 years ago in China, old proofs showing its use are seen in Egyptian papyruses dating back to 2300 BCE.<sup>6</sup> In Europe, it began to be popular under the name of “zone therapy” in the 14th century.<sup>7</sup> In the early 20th century, Dr. William Fitzgerald considered to be the father of reflexology observed that when pressure is applied to certain bony protrusions, numbness occurred at some other points of the body, and thought that such reflex responses could be used as a method of treatment. Later on, physiotherapist Eunice Ingham laid the foundations of today's reflexology by mapping the reflex points in

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# Foot Reflexology Chart

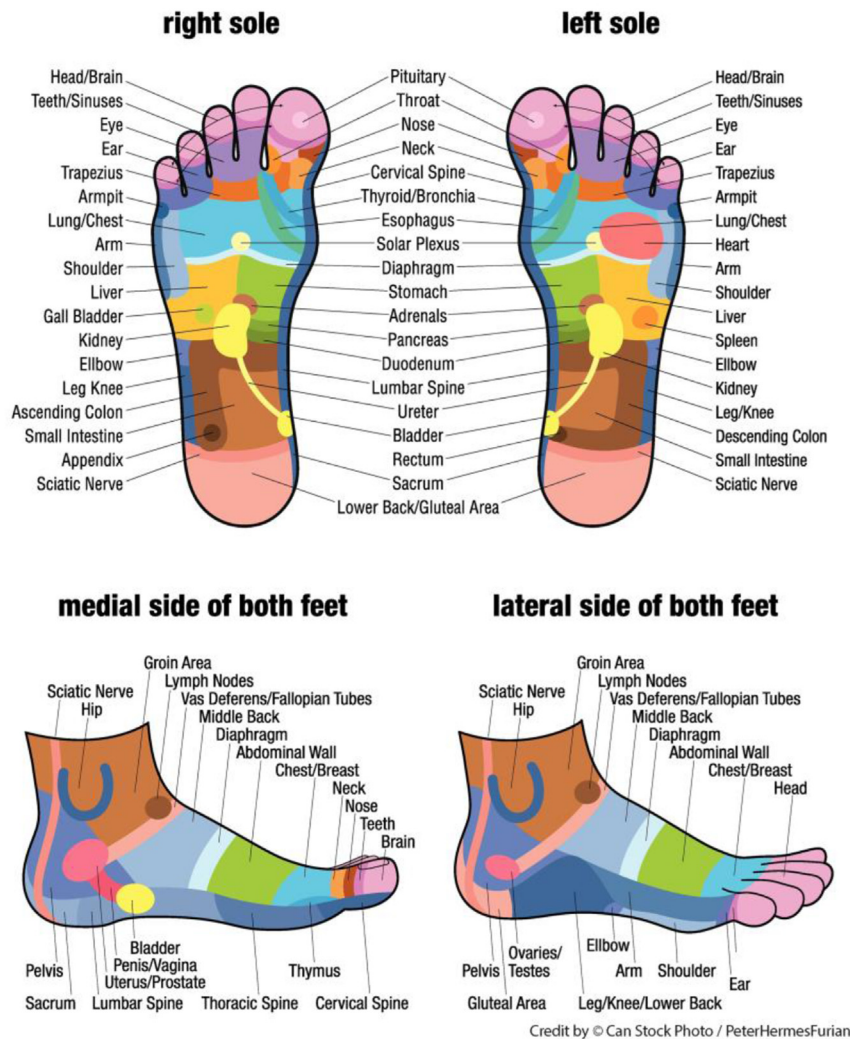


Fig. 1. Foot Reflexology Chart (Credit by Can Stock Photo Inc./Peter Hermes Furain. Permission received).

the hands and feet.<sup>8</sup> Afterwards, reflexology became a procedure preferred by many people because of certain reasons such as the facts that it is a safe and easy-to-apply procedure based on simple manual techniques that do not require any drugs or invasive intervention.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Application

In reflexology, there are two internationally recognized techniques ad Ingham method and Rwo Shur method. The first method does not involve the use of any tools whereas the second method utilizes certain tools such as a wooden stick.<sup>10</sup>

According to the available sources of information, an ideal reflexology therapy should include the followings:

- Reflexology sessions should take 1 h on the average, and should be applied on a weekly basis.
- Sessions should definitely be done in a relaxing environment.

-When a patient comes for a reflexology session for the first time, his/her detailed medical history should be taken and his/her

current medical conditions and complaints should be fully learned. Then, whether the patient has ever seen a physician for those complaints should be questioned, and if he/she has not done so already, the necessity of such a consultation should be told to him/her. In addition, the patient should also be told that he/she should not stop taking any drugs before consulting his/her physician during this period.

-Inspection is the second step that a reflexologist should take after taking the medical history. If the reflexologist observes any contraindication for the procedure (gout, leg ulcers, peripheral vascular disease, deep vein thrombosis, infections, wounds-bruises, lymphedema) at this stage, he/she should not carry out the process. If the reflexologist is in doubt about the patient's health status and is suspicious of a specific problem during inspection, he/she should not tell it to the patient and should just tell him/her to see a physician. It is because a reflexologist does not have the authority and competence to make diagnosis. After completion of the session, the patient should be informed about the possible side effects, and should be advised to contact the reflexologist in case of any unexpected effect.<sup>11,12</sup>

-When reflexology is intended to be applied to cancer patients,

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