



The effect of complementary and alternative medicine on the quality of life of cancer survivors: A systematic review and meta-analyses[☆]

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Quality of life;
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Summary

Purpose: To assess whether quality of life (QOL) improved in cancer survivors who had undertaken a complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) intervention, compared to cancer survivors who had not.

Methods: A systematic review of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) was undertaken. Electronic databases including MEDLINE, Cochrane CENTRAL, CINAHL, PSYCHINFO, EMBASE, and ClinicalTrials.gov were searched from 1990 to 2012. Search terms incorporating the concepts of cancer survivors, QOL and various types of CAM were used.

Results: From 1767 records retrieved and screened 13 full text articles were included in the review. Nine studies were deemed to have a high risk, one a low risk, and three an unclear risk of bias. CAM interventions used incorporated yoga, meditation or mindfulness, energy healing, medical qigong, homoeopathy, or mistletoe therapy. Ten of the studies used breast cancer survivors, whilst the remaining three included other cancer types. The studies had mixed results either showing a significantly greater improvement in QOL in the intervention group compared to the control group, or no significant difference between groups. However, twelve studies were of low to moderate quality, limiting the robustness of findings.

Conclusions: This review has identified significant gaps in the evidence base for the effectiveness of CAM on QOL in cancer survivors.

Further work in this field needs to adopt more rigorous methodology to help support cancer survivors to actively embrace self-management and effective CAMs, without recommending inappropriate interventions which are of no proven benefit.

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Background

Breakthroughs in cancer treatments and technologies mean that cancer patients are living longer, with over 64% surviving for at least five years after their initial cancer diagnosis.¹ As a result of these advances a growing ageing cancer population has emerged.¹

Cancer survivors are more likely to suffer from secondary health problems such as fatigue, anxiety, depression, nausea, and pain, as well as being at an increased risk of developing secondary tumours.^{2–4} Many patients report feeling abandoned and isolated following cessation of active treatment,⁵ which could exacerbate symptoms such as depression and anxiety. This may have an impact on their quality of life (QOL), which has been reported as being lower than other population groups.⁶

It is important therefore to look at ways of improving cancer survivors' QOL and long term health outcomes. QOL

can be difficult to compare across different studies due to the multitude of scales that have been designed to evaluate it. However, in recent years more rigorous QOL tools have been developed, and the importance of recognising its value is reflected by the increasing number of studies specifying QOL as an outcome measure.⁷

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been defined as 'a variety of different medical systems and therapies based on the knowledge, skills and practices derived from theories, philosophies and experiences used to maintain and improve health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, relieve or treat physical and mental illnesses. CAM has been mainly used outside conventional health care, but in some countries certain treatments are being adopted or adapted by conventional health care.'⁸ It encompasses a wide range of therapies including acupuncture, homoeopathy, meditation, chiropody, reflexology, and massage therapy.³ It has often been utilised by cancer patients as a way of

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