

Integrative Oncology

Gabriel Lopez, MD^{a,*}, Jun J. Mao, MD, MSCE^b, Lorenzo Cohen, PhD^c

KEYWORDS

- Integrative oncology • Cancer • Symptoms • Complementary health approaches • Lifestyle

KEY POINTS

- Integrative oncology is an emerging field that helps support the health of patients with cancer and their caregivers through an evidence-informed approach to lifestyle and behavior modification and use of complementary health therapies in the context of conventional cancer care delivery.
- A significant number of patients with cancer are seeking complementary health approaches and have a desire to engage in discussions regarding this subject area with their health care providers.
- Integrative approaches (eg, lifestyle, meditation, yoga, acupuncture, massage) can provide patients relief from cancer and cancer treatment-related symptoms and improve their physical and psychosocial health.
- An evidence-informed approach is important when recommending an integrative cancer plan, taking into account potential toxicities (eg, direct organ toxicity, bleeding, herb-drug interactions) and precautions (eg, low blood counts, fracture risk).
- Efforts at enhancing communication between patients and health care professionals, as well as between integrative practitioners and conventional health care teams, are critical to achieving optimal health and healing for patients with cancer, from diagnosis through treatment and into survivorship or end of life.

INTEGRATIVE ONCOLOGY: DEFINITION

Integrative medicine is an approach to health care delivery that balances complementary health approaches and lifestyle medicine with conventional medicine in a deliberate manner that is personalized, evidence-informed, and safe. According to the

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^a Section of Integrative Medicine, Department of Palliative, Rehabilitation and Integrative Medicine, Integrative Medicine Center, University of Texas, MD Anderson Cancer Center, 1515 Holcombe Blvd, Unit 1414, Houston, TX 77030, USA; ^b Integrative Medicine Service, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, 1429 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021, USA; ^c Integrative Medicine, Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Palliative, Rehabilitation and Integrative Medicine, University of Texas, MD Anderson Cancer Center, 1515 Holcombe Blvd, Houston, TX 77030, USA

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gabriel.lopez@mdanderson.org

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National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, complementary health approaches refer to natural products (eg, dietary supplements, herbals), mind and body practices (eg, meditation, yoga, massage, acupuncture), and other systems of care such as traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, or naturopathy. In a recent survey reviewing use of complementary health approaches among adults in the United States, the most commonly used approaches include natural products (dietary supplements other than vitamins and minerals); deep breathing; and practices such as yoga, tai chi, or qigong.¹ Integrative oncology is the application of integrative medicine to the care of patients with cancer and their caregivers. According to the Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine & Health,² “integrative medicine and health reaffirms the importance of the relationship between practitioner and patient, focuses on the whole person, is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic and lifestyle approaches, healthcare professionals and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing.”

CLINICAL CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Interest in and use of complementary health approaches is highest among individuals with cancer. Although up to 38% of the general US population has engaged in complementary health approaches, this number increases to 68% in surveys of patients with cancer, with even greater use in those with breast cancer or advanced/incurable illness.^{3–5} Patients with cancer look to these approaches to improve wellness, enhance immune function, and find relief for pain and other symptoms. When looking for guidance regarding how to use complementary health approaches, patients may make decisions based on recommendations gathered from resources of varying reliability, including the media, Internet, other patients, family members, and health care professionals.^{6,7} In addition, patient experience of unmet needs from their health care providers, a desire to engage in health-supporting behaviors, and finding meaning related to cancer have motivated patients to seek complementary therapies to augment the current approach to cancer prevention and treatment.^{6,8–10}

A significant number of patients are seeking complementary health approaches and have a desire to engage in discussions regarding this subject area with their health care providers.¹¹ To encourage effective dialogue, it is important for health care providers to enter into an open, nonjudgmental discussion with their patients regarding their past or present use of or interest in complementary health approaches. A thoughtful approach to entering into a dialogue about integrative medicine interests can play an important role in developing an integrative care plan (**Box 1**). Not only can these open discussions strengthen the therapeutic alliance between patient and provider but there are implications for patient safety. An open, nonjudgmental inquiry into the use of complementary health approaches leads to increased disclosure and ability to guide patients safely, which is especially important for specific approaches such as natural products, which can have the potential for harm, causing organ injury, increased cancer risk, or interference with treatment efficacy.¹²

In an attempt to meet patients' needs and guide the appropriate use of complementary therapies, an increasing number of cancer centers have developed, or are in the process of developing, integrative oncology programs.^{13,14} Integrative oncology programs may include clinical services such as a physician consultation, oncology massage, acupuncture, nutrition counseling, health psychology (eg, stress management, support for behavior change, and lifestyle counseling), exercise counseling,

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