

Restoring Balance for People with Cancer Through Integrative Oncology



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KEYWORDS

- Integrative medicine • Cancer • Nutrition • Chinese medicine • Nature
- Quality of life • Ancient medicine • Mind-body medicine

KEY POINTS

- Alongside their conventional cancer therapies, patients have an opportunity to include integrative medicine to enhance their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.
- The integrative oncology team works together with the patient's oncologist, surgeon, and radiation oncologist to provide support and augment care during and after active cancer treatment.
- Individualized integrative medicine allows patients a choice from diverse practices and treatments, including nutritional support and dietary changes, yoga, Aryurvedic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), meditation, qigong, and other mind-body modalities.

INTRODUCTION

When faced with a life-threatening diagnosis, such as cancer, a patient's desire to focus on everything possible to support conventional medical treatments is understandable. More than 65% of individuals diagnosed with cancer in the United States report having used some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to help combat their disease, manage symptoms and treat side effects, and increase

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their overall well-being and quality of life.¹ Integrative oncology, or the professional discipline of integrating CAM into mainstream cancer treatments and survivorship, encompasses a diverse group of ancient traditional health and healing practices, systems, and approaches. These include such modalities as the use of nutrition, dietary and herbal supplements, acupuncture, and mind-body practices to name a few. To best understand how CAM therapies may be integrated within conventional oncology treatment it is beneficial to first rethink what constitutes disease and illness. This article presents a guiding conceptual framework from an integrative perspective, based on the concept of balance and imbalance. From this perspective, an integrative approach can be used to help restore quality of life, enhance lifestyle choices, mitigate symptoms, and support a healthy future.

WESTERN VERSUS TRADITIONAL MEDICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING CANCER

Conventional Western medical cancer treatments focus on identifying and targeting specific cancers in different parts of the body on cellular and molecular levels, measuring tumor responses, and identifying cell signaling and growth factors.² Although this approach is mostly targeted to eliminate cancerous cells, the whole body is involved. Integrative medical approaches are grounded in the concept of balance and are not limited to pathology of the physical body and cellular activity. Balance occurs in the body as cells die and are replaced, as the nervous system maintains its parasympathetic and sympathetic balance, and as the immune system keeps a balance between protection from unhealthy microbes and an attack on itself as in autoimmune disease. Examples of more holistic approaches to balance are Ying and Yang of Chinese medicine³; Vata, Pita, Kapha doshas of Ayurvedic medicine⁴; choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic humors of early Hippocratic medicine⁵; and hot/cold, damp/dry characteristics of eclectic physicians.⁶ Many ancient medical traditions speak of treating the root of the tree, rather than treating the branches. Treating the branches addresses the symptoms, whereas treating the roots address the cause of the imbalance, which in their ancient understanding reaches far beyond cellular function. In these traditions health is not simply the absence of physical illness, but rather a state of harmony and balance between the body, mind, and spirit and a relationship with the living environment.⁷

Traditional ancient practices of medicine (whether Chinese, Ayurvedic and Naturopathic or Native American) are unique, because they identify and address illness from a physical and energetic imbalance.⁸ In these approaches it is understood that energy comprises all matter at a fundamental level, and flows within, around, and throughout the entire universe. Energy cannot be destroyed, but is changed by a variety of circumstances, which cause an imbalance. According to laws of quantum physics, energy and matter are simply two aspects of the same thing. Thus an energetic disturbance in the body on a physical or material level can also affect mind and spirit, and vice versa.

Within this context, cancer may be seen as a condition where the body is out of balance whether from a source within or from without. Becoming unbalanced at any level (physical, energetic, emotional or mental) can produce pathophysiologic changes resulting in the manifestation of disease. From a traditional medical perspective, the dynamic intersection and interaction of biochemical networks are affected by the diverse milieu in which they operate. Thus from this paradigm, cancer as an isolated entity does not exist, at least not in the way that Western conventional medicine has conceptualized it.

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