

Therapeutic Massage for Cancer Patients

Cancer patients at almost every stage of their experience are finding comfort at the hands of skilled massage therapists. In addition to the general health benefits of a good massage, cancer patients have reported relief from a number of the physical, mental and emotional discomforts related to the disease and its treatment.

Specifically, massage may decrease symptoms related to radiation and chemotherapy, increase the effectiveness of some cancer treatments, strengthen the immune system, and reduce the need for pain medication. Massage stimulates faster wound healing, and can address problems related to surgery like adhesions, scarring, edema and lymphedema. Massage contributes to emotional well-being by helping to reduce stress and anxiety, and providing pleasant social interaction. It can empower patients to participate in the healing process, and help rebuild hope.

Quality of Life

Today cancer is more often considered a chronic illness than a terminal one. Early detection and more effective treatments mean that many patients are living longer with active cancer, as well as with cancer in remission. In addition to curing the disease, improving the quality of life has emerged as an important goal of cancer treatment.

Nevertheless, being diagnosed with cancer can be devastating to body, mind, and spirit. In addition to dealing with the physical aspects of the disease and its treatment, cancer patients often feel helpless, alone, and betrayed by their own bodies. The emotional side effects of the disease can be as painful as the cancer itself, and may even interfere with the body's healing process.

Complementary therapies are being integrated with standard cancer treatment to better address the whole person and their quality of life. Research studies suggest that various forms of massage therapy can be beneficial for people dealing with cancer.

Benefits for Cancer Patients

Because massage therapy is holistic treating body, mind and spirit, it has numerous benefits for cancer patients seeking a better quality of life. Research has supported many of the benefits listed below. Others are reported by caregivers, and by patients themselves.

General Benefits

Reduces stress • Increases relaxation • Improves sleep • Stimulates bowel activity • Promotes blood and lymph circulation • Improves immune system function • Provides pain relief • Increases alertness and mental clarity • Provides pleasant touch experience .

Benefits Related to Surgery

Promotes faster wound healing • Faster recovery from anesthesia • Increases elasticity to scarred areas • Breaks up adhesions related to scarring • Reduces need for pain medication • Decreases edema and lymphedema • Relieves muscle soreness due to prolonged bed rest • Helps prevent bedsores • Shortens hospital stays .

Benefits Related to Radiation and Chemo-therapy

Reduces symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, diarrhea, and loss of appetite.

Emotional Benefits

Decreases anxiety and depression • Increases feelings of well-being • Provides relief from isolation

• Offers meaningful social interaction • Provides a pleasant distraction • Helps re-establish a positive body image • Empowers patients to participate in their healing process • Helps rebuild hope .

Cautions

There are a few cautions for cancer patients seeking massage therapy. An important one concerns the risk of metastasis or spread of cancer cells. Recent research does not support the earlier belief that massage should be avoided altogether because of the possibility that it might spread the cancer. However, there are certain general precautions to keep in mind. For example, massage should be avoided completely around the site of a tumor, or where a tumor has recently been removed. The patient's physician should be consulted to assess the possibility that massage may be harmful for a particular person.

Although massage has been reported to lessen discomforts after radiation and chemo-therapy, the timing of receiving massage and the amount of pressure used need to be monitored carefully. For example, after radiation therapy the use of lubricants on the affected skin area may be prohibited, and care must be taken with skin damaged by the treatment. A patient receiving massage too soon after a bout of chemo-therapy may be overtaxed and negative side-effects worsened.

Massage therapists trained to work with cancer patients need background information about the type of cancer, its stage of development, and treatments being received in order to time sessions and plan massage applications. Expect them to take a thorough health history, request frequent updates on a patient's condition, and ask to consult with the physician and other caregivers to maximize benefits and avoid negative effects.

Massage Therapy Approaches

Well trained and experienced massage therapists usually have a wide variety of approaches they can call on to best serve the interests of their clients. The following are examples of approaches that have been found effective for cancer patients at various times in the course of treatment and recovery.

Swedish massage is good for general relaxation and circulation benefits.

Myofascial release helps normalize connective tissue after surgery and radiation therapy.

Lymphatic drainage techniques are used to reduce edema and lymphedema after surgery.

Energy therapies (e.g. Therapeutic Touch, Reiki) promote balance and relaxation, and since they are performed with no or very light touch, can be effective when approaches that use pressure are contraindicated.

These are just a few of the many approaches to massage therapy available. Discuss with your massage therapist or health care provider regarding which of many forms of massage therapy might be best at different times in cancer treatment.

Cancer patients are encouraged to empower themselves in their healing process by learning more about the disease and its treatment. The following references are excellent resources to find out more about cancer and massage therapy.

This information is intended as general information only. Contact your physician for diagnosis of medical conditions, and for advice on whether massage might be beneficial for you.