

Reflexology footnotes

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Reflexology Comforts Breast Cancer Patients

Researchers at Michigan State University are finding that many women who are receiving chemotherapy while in the late stages of breast cancer are turning to a complementary therapy known as reflexology to help them cope.

In a pilot study, researchers from MSU's College of Nursing tested three different complementary therapies – reflexology, guided imagery and reminiscence therapy, in which women recall times in their lives when they've met and overcome challenges. Of those three, reflexology proved to be the most effective.

“Reflexology is the one people stuck with the most during the eight-week protocol,” said Gwen Wyatt, a professor in MSU's College of Nursing who headed the project. “It's also the one that had the most positive outcomes.”

Women who are receiving chemotherapy for late-stage breast cancer face myriad physical and emotional issues. Reflexology – which is a specialized foot therapy that applies firm pressure to certain parts of the sole of the foot – helps women adjust better to their treatment. Reflexology can be used to support patients through treatment such as chemotherapy or for enhancing well-being for cancer-free individuals.

“We see things like a decrease in depression and anxiety, and improvements in spirituality and emotional quality of life,” Wyatt said. “Overall, they have an improved quality of life.”

We don't really have a Western, scientific way of testing how this works. The mechanism is not clearly understood. But for us, we just measure the patient's perception of change. Currently, there are no physiological measures,” she said.

Wyatt stressed that reflexology and other similar therapies are strictly complementary, to be used in conjunction with conventional health care.

“These supportive measures are intended to create a less stressful link for the patient to the treatment center,” Wyatt said. “Instead of dreading the next cancer treatment, patients are able to focus on the comfort measure that will be provided during treatment.”

Wyatt and colleagues are now embarking on a more detailed investigation into the value of reflexology in treating late-stage breast cancer patients. Using a National Institutes of Health grant of more than \$3 million, they will more closely examine the benefits of reflexology in a controlled study.

Women will be divided into three groups – one will receive reflexology for four weeks, one a “placebo” foot massage for four weeks, and one will serve as a control group. Participants will be interviewed before the study, immediately after the four weeks of therapy, and again two months later. This way the immediate effects can be compared with more long-term benefits.

“Breast cancer can be a very difficult experience and advanced-stage disease even more so,” Wyatt said. “This study will make the treatment journey more manageable and women may want to continue it after cancer treatment to maintain a sense of well-being.”

For more information on the MSU study, contact: Gwen Wyatt, College of Nursing, 517-432-5511, gwyatt@msu.edu; or Tom Oswald, University Relations, 517-355-2281, oswald@msu.edu.

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