

Reflexology footnotes

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Integrative Medicine at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

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The Integrative Medicine Service (IMS) at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) began in the fall of 1999. It promotes the combination of conventional medicine along with evidence-based complementary therapies for cancer patients. Massage, reflexology, shiatsu, light-touch massage therapy (Reiki), meditation, guided imagery, self-hypnosis, acupuncture, nutritional counseling, yoga, Qi-gong, and various fitness programs are offered. The mission of our department is to control symptoms, enhance quality of life, and scientifically study these therapies to determine their value for patients with cancer.

In addition to clinical services and research, we also train practitioners as well as physicians and other oncology specialists, and we offer free details about herbs, vitamins, and other over-the-counter remedies through our award-winning website: www.mskcc.org/AboutHerbs

The Integrative Medicine programs are available to MSKCC cancer inpatients and outpatients and their families, cancer patients from other hospitals, MSKCC staff, and people from the community. Pain, anxiety, nausea, fatigue, depression, insomnia, and peripheral neuropathy are the symptoms that are primarily targeted. In 2006, we saw a total of 10,800 outpatients. Of these, 1,300 visits were for reflexology.

To perform all of these services and conduct laboratory and clinical research, our team consists of 60 staff, including 6 acupuncturists, 8 class instructors, 1 RN instructor, 5 research study assistants, 15 licensed massage therapists, 2 reflexologist RNs, 14 administrative staff, 2 dance therapists, 2 music therapists, 2 mind-body therapists, 2 Attending physicians, 1 chief of the service, 1 biostatistician, 1 nutritionist, and 1 pharmacist. For more details see www.mskcc.org/integrativemedicine.

Our service is now an integral part of cancer care at MSKCC, fully accepted and respected by MSKCC physicians and nurses. This acceptance took some time to develop due to a general lack of knowledge on the part of many physicians and nurses. Efforts were made to educate hospital staff, to share our publications in medical journals, and to chart patient's severity of symptoms pre and post therapy using a 0-10 rating scale. Medical staff pay attention to numerical ratings more than descriptive results.

In my experience as an oncology nurse and reflexologist, I have provided and documented patients' reports of improved relaxation and sleep, diminished anxiety, lessened peripheral neuropathy, and pain reduction for cancer patients and others. The touch of reflexology communicates caring and comfort, is never painful, and is always sensitive to each patient's medical status and tolerance.

Reflexology is ideal for patients with cancer because it is non-invasive, can be performed in any setting, requires no equipment, and does not interfere with patient privacy. It is appropriate for patients at any stage of cancer, including end stage disease. Reflexology can be combined with other therapies such as the relaxation techniques of breathing, imaging, and music therapy. It is not appropriate for patients who have deep vein thromboses (blood clots) of the lower and upper extremities, thrombocytopenia (low platelets), or bruising, rashes, severe edema or wounds of the ankles or feet.

Sessions vary in length from 20 minutes for inpatients to up to 60 minutes for outpatients. Patients usually benefit from more than one session, although even one session can bring great relief. Reflexology is increasingly applied to relieve symptoms in patients with cancer. Small randomized trials show that it reduces anxiety, pain, nausea and fatigue. One study of 23 breast and lung cancer patients showed reflexology to provide a significant decrease in anxiety in both groups, with a significant decrease in pain for the breast patients (Stephenson, 2000). Nausea, pain and anxiety were significantly reduced in an inpatient population of 87 cancer patients with a 10 minute foot reflexology (Grealish, 2000). In the largest study, 1,290 cancer patients at a major cancer center received light touch body massage therapy or reflexology for symptom control. Reflexology was shown to produce a 50% improvement in their symptoms (Cassileth, 2004).

As an oncology nurse reflexologist, it is a gift to offer the special touch of reflexology to our cancer patients. I have seen reflexology transform patients from very high anxiety of 8/10 to levels of 2/10 within the course of a single session. Reflexology is a powerful tool that brings great relief to people who are suffering, as well as a gentle therapy that even the sickest patients appreciate and request.

References:

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