

Integrative Oncology - Acupuncture

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Integrative Oncology is the synthesis of mainstream care and nonpharmacologic, evidence-based complementary therapies for the control of cancer-related physical and emotional symptoms. This month, we explore the ancient Chinese practice of acupuncture, which is widely used in the palliative care of cancer patients.

DR. CASSILETH: Acupuncture is an important component of traditional Chinese medicine. The practice originated more than 2,000 years ago. It involves stimulation of one or more predetermined points on the body with sterile, filiform, disposable needles, sometimes with added heat (moxibustion), pressure (acupressure) or electricity to enhance therapeutic effect. The needles are much thinner than the hypodermic needles used for injections.

The ancient theory underlying acupuncture assumes that "qi" (pronounced "chee"), or life energy flows through vertical energy channels called meridians, which were thought to connect the internal organs. It was believed that disease occurs when the meridians become blocked. Acupuncture was thought to relieve the blockage and permit the normal flow of qi, thereby restoring health.

Acupuncture is being used in the palliative care of cancer patients, to alleviate pain and a variety of treatment side effects. It is generally safe when performed by trained practitioners and is well tolerated by patients, including children.

Some conditions require continuous treatments in order to achieve long-term effect. Cancer patients considering acupuncture should seek certified or state-licensed practitioners who have training or experience in working with cancer patients. - Barrie Cassileth, PhD

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