

-
- [Radio](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Shop](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Local](#)
- [Children](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [more Topics](#)
- [help](#)

[ABC Health & Wellbeing](#)

The Pulse

[\(4 comments\)](#) | [Share](#) | [Print](#)

Massage and cancer

by Sue Daniel

Many of us think of massage as a treat. But, for people with a serious illness like cancer, it can be a powerful tool to help them cope with their treatment.

Published 03/06/2010



[Image source: iStockphoto]

Most of us turn to massage to help relieve stress, or to ease tight muscles after a physical workout.

However, massage is slowly being recognised as a way to improve wellbeing for people with cancer; not as a replacement to medical treatments, but as a way of helping patients cope with their treatment experience.

Research suggests massage may help cancer patients cope better with certain aspects of their treatment. A review of eight studies found that massage helps improve cancer patients' psychological wellbeing, and can help reduce anxiety in the short-term.

At the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre in New York, a team of specialist massage

therapists works on the wards with medical staff. A five-year research project, involving more than 1000 of the hospital's patients, showed massage provided a significant improvement in pain management plus a reduction in fatigue and anxiety.

And while there still needs to be more research into the benefits of massage for people with cancer, the idea of integrating massage into cancer treatment is slowly becoming more accepted in the United States, parts of Europe and Britain.

In Australia, the Sydney Adventist Hospital – which has a strong commitment to complementary medicines such as reflexology, meditation and acupuncture – now employs a qualified massage therapist to work alongside the oncology team.

Benefits of touch

Oncology massage therapist and trainer, Eleanor Oyston has been a driving force behind the appointment at Sydney Adventist Hospital. She wants all patients in hospitals for cancer treatment to be able to enjoy the benefits of massage.

Oyston came to massage therapy after working for 20 years as a research microbiologist diagnosing cancer. Since then she has worked for many years with cancer patients through Petria King's Quest for Life Foundation, which provides residential programs and services to support people living with cancer, neurological and other serious illnesses.

She says when someone with cancer is in hospital, almost everybody that touches them causes them some discomfort.

"[With oncology massage] we really work at not causing any pain," she emphasises.

Haematologist Dr David Joske agrees that for people with cancer, many forms of physical contact can be painful, especially if people are only touched during medical treatment.

Joske established Australia's first so-called integrated cancer support centre – SolarisCare in WA – where patients can access both complementary care and advanced medical and surgical treatments.

"Cancer patients are often very isolated and many need human touch," he says.

"Cancer is a disease mostly of the elderly and ... at worst, some patients' only tactile stimulus is painful needles [used] for blood tests and giving chemo."

He says there are a number of different types of massage suitable for people with cancer "varying from simple therapeutic massage, to those that are coupled with other belief systems (aromatherapy, reiki, reflexology). Our experience with Solaris is that all can be beneficial.

"One outreach clinic, which we set up in the busiest chemo waiting area of the hospital, created a much less formal atmosphere and improved the patient chemotherapy experience."

Dispelling fears

Joske also says there is no research to support concerns that massage might spread cancer. His view is backed by the New South Wales Cancer Council, which states "light, relaxing massage can be given safely to people at all stages of their cancer journey".

The Council has moved to dispel fears in a pamphlet "Massage and Cancer: an introduction to the benefits of touch".

The pamphlet states, "cancer may metastasise (spread) into the lymphatic system via the lymph nodes, or it may start in the lymphatic system itself. However, the circulation of lymph – from massage or other movement – does not cause cancer to spread."

Sydney Adventist Hospital's medical oncologist, Dr Gavin Marx, agrees with the Cancer Council.

"The concerns have been studied, but there's no real risk of harm."

Oyston says most people seeking a treatment feel safe if they know their massage therapist is properly trained. With this in mind, she's developed a training program for therapists with at least two years massage experience.

The training involves visits to an oncology ward and to chemotherapy and radiotherapy service centres in hospital. Trainees learn how to look out for telltale warning signs.

"If there are areas in the body that are unusually warm, if they've got a history of clots, or if they're on anti-coagulant therapy, it's 'stop, look and listen'," Oyston says.

"If there's any redness or swelling, we instruct them to stop. So we have lots of guidelines in place".

Oncology massage is very gentle and slow, more so than in other therapeutic massages, and treatment times are often shorter. The therapist focuses on minimising the patients' discomfort – especially those attached to intravenous drips, or those with fragile bones or other physical changes brought on by their medical treatment.

More research

But if oncology massage is to really take off in Australia, there will need to be more research.

Marx says the issue in healthcare is always how to spend limited amounts of money and "without scientific data to approach Medicare to fund it, the [Sydney Adventist Hospital] program will be difficult to sustain".

Apart from the obvious financial obstacles, there's also resistance from some members of the medical community.

But Oyston and her trainees are confident doctors will become less skeptical when they begin to see how massage benefits people with cancer.

More info

- [Cancer Care - The Health Report - 08/03/2010](#)

[email a friend](#) [email ABC Health & Wellbeing](#)

- [\(4 comments\)](#)
- [Share this article](#)

Comments (4)

[Add your comment](#)

- **Dr. Rey Tiquia PhD :**

04 Jun 2010 11:23:36am

According to Xiao Yan Sheng in his book "Practical Manual on the Use of the Imaginary Human Acupuncture Meridian Pathways' ('Ren ti jing luo shi yong shou ce', 2007), keeping the Qi and blood flowing freely along acupuncture meridian pathways 'shu tong jing luo' by tapping or applying massage along these pathways 'qiao jing luo' can prevent the occurrence of illnesses including cancer.

[Reply Alert moderator](#)

- **Betty philippines :**

04 Jun 2010 7:43:08pm

I am very much interested in learning this massage for cancer patient.
Do you have an online training.
I am a licensed massage therapist with masteral degree in education.

[Reply Alert moderator](#)

- **Robynne :**

06 Jun 2010 7:49:42pm

What an empowering article - I have a brother & close friend who take advantage of the SolarisCare centre in Perth WA. It is true, much of the necessary treatment brings pain & discomfort. I know how much they benefit from the excellent hands on therapy and the loving kindness in which it is administered. To have such therapy centres available is invaluable. More than that, to have such therapists available who volunteer their time is more than a blessing... THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU.

[Reply Alert moderator](#)

- **Cancer patient :**

17 Jun 2010 8:05:00am

Knowing the benefits of massage I was keen to continue after I was diagnosed with cancer. However my oncologist met my question about whether this was ok or whether it could spread tumour cells through the lymphatics with derision. Thank god somebody has recognised the concern and done the research.

[Reply Alert moderator](#)

More Massage on Health & Wellbeing

[More](#)

[© 2010 ABC](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Conditions of Use](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact](#)