

MASSAGE AND CANCER: PRACTICE GUIDELINES

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Abstract

Massage is a commonly sought therapy by patients with cancer. Recent research indicates that massage is a valid application for cancer pain, anxiety, nausea and vomiting, lymphedema, and carer support. However, complications such as coagulation disorders, metastasis to bone, open wounds, and dermatitis require medical management. The evidence supports that massage therapists can offer treatment for patients with cancer with confidence.

Reference

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Keywords

Massage; Cancer; Guidelines; Evidence-based medicine; Complementary medicine.

Aim

The purpose of this article is to examine the use of massage in cancer through recently published evidence. This article also aims to develop an awareness of the contraindications when applying massage to cancer patients.

Introduction

The use of massage treatment by patients with cancer is common. A survey published in 2008 of 367 Australian women with breast cancer revealed 87.5% used complementary medicine, and of these, 41.4% used massage⁽¹⁾. In Canada, 80% of women with breast cancer used complementary medicine including massage⁽²⁾. A survey in the USA of 189 women with lung cancer showed 44% used complementary or alternative medicine and 6.9% used massage to control symptoms—particularly difficulty with breathing and pain.

It is important for therapists to understand the evidence validating the application of massage for cancer. This article is based on recent research data and intends to guide massage therapists towards appropriate treatment plans that incorporate an awareness of contraindications.

Method And Results

The data was obtained by performing a Medline search using the words 'massage' and 'cancer' but not 'prostatic'. The search included only papers published in the past five years. From the articles retrieved, titles and abstracts were read and irrelevant or insignificant papers were excluded at this author's discretion. A total of 87 articles were considered and information was either extracted from the abstracts or from the retrieved papers.

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Discussion

The therapeutic application of massage for cancer relates to the management of pain, depression and anxiety, lymphedema, nausea and vomiting during chemotherapy, and carer support.

Pain

Pain is a common feature in the latter stages of terminal cancer. Gorman et al.⁽⁴⁾ put it succinctly: 'Pain, or its anticipation, remains one of the most feared symptoms of the dying process.' In a study comparing massage to simple touch, both massage and touch produced sustained improvements in cancer pain, but massage therapy was significantly more effective at improving pain than touch alone immediately after application ($P < 0.0001$)⁽⁵⁾.

In advanced cancer, bone involvement is a significant problem and, '...results in intolerable pain, substantial morbidity, and impaired quality of life in 34%–45% of cancer patients.'⁽⁶⁾ Massage was shown to have an effective immediate, short-term (20–30 minutes), intermediate (1–2.5 hours) and long-term (16–18 hours) benefits on the pain and anxiety associated with bone cancer⁽⁶⁾. Based on current research, it is reasonable to conclude that massage and reflexology⁽⁷⁾ are valid applications for cancer pain.

Anxiety

The most consistent symptom reduction reported for massage therapy in numerous studies is anxiety^(8,9). For example, reflexology has a powerful anxiety-reducing effect⁽¹⁰⁾ and has been shown to help cancer patients receiving chemotherapy feel better and also cope better with their disease⁽¹¹⁾.

In a study by Campeau et al., pre and post massage anxiety was measured in patients undergoing radiation therapy⁽¹²⁾. Though there was no major impact on intermediate-term anxiety in patients undergoing radiation therapy, there was a significant immediate decrease in anxiety after massage treatment.

Anxiety and depression and immunologic state was improved with aromatherapy massage in a trial with twelve breast cancer patients⁽¹³⁾. Although aromatherapy massage does not confer benefits in the long term, the immediate effects on depression and anxiety for up to two weeks were clinically significant⁽¹⁴⁾.

In a study of mothers of children with cancer, tension and anxiety levels were significantly higher than in mothers of children suffering from other types of diseases or with healthy children⁽¹⁵⁾. Because massage has a favourable effect on stressed mothers, it may serve as a useful support tool. Furthermore, massage for children with cancer appears to decrease anxiety in both parents and children⁽¹⁶⁾.

Lymphedema

Fluid accumulation due to obstruction of lymphatic vessels is termed lymphedema and manifests as swelling in the subcutaneous tissues—it is a possible development for patients with cancer. The cause of fluid accumulation can vary and therapists must make a reasonable diagnosis. Table 1 summarises the diagnostic features of fluid swelling.

Table 1. Classifications of oedema, causes, features and treatment

Condition	Cause of Condition	Distinguishing Features	Treatment Options
Primary lymphedema	Possibly inherited, not related to cancer or cancer treatments	Oedema, fibrosis, may be present bilaterally, notably in the legs	Lymphatic massage, compression garments, surgery
Secondary lymphedema	Acquired through damage or blockage of the lymphatics e.g., surgery, infection, radiation treatment, tumors within the lymphatics	Oedema, fibrosis, may be present unilaterally relative to the damaged body section, e.g., one arm post mastectomy and lymphatic resection	Lymphatic massage, compression garments
Peripheral oedema	May be caused by conditions such as heart and/or kidney failure	Fluid accumulation at the extremities, noticeably in the lower legs	Medical intervention for failed organs, massage may help manage oedema

Lymphedema in cancer is mainly associated with patients undergoing treatment of malignancy; for example, women being treated for breast cancer. The arm on the affected side may become swollen after a mastectomy, lymph node resection, and radiotherapy. Patients presenting with swelling of an extremity should be assessed and the risk factors for oedema should be identified. These risk factors include prior surgery, radiotherapy, infections, or other forms of trauma to the affected limb. It is important to differentiate lymphedema from other causes of limb swelling⁽¹⁷⁾. Knowledge of cancer and appropriate training should be considered by students aiming for a specialised niche in lymphatic drainage.

Nausea And Vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are a significant problem for people with cancer, especially patients undergoing cancer treatment. There is some evidence that massage⁽¹⁸⁻²²⁾ and acupuncture⁽²³⁻²⁷⁾ assists in managing this problem.

Practice Guidelines For Applying Massage To Cancer Patients

Massage practitioners should be able to offer assistance to patients seeking massage as a therapy for cancer. However, it would be unethical and deceptive to offer a prognosis of a cure because no evidence exists to support this claim.

Conversely, the practitioner can have confidence that massage therapy has the potential to assist with pain, nausea and vomiting, anxiety and depression, lymphedema and provide benefits for carers of patients with cancer. Practitioners should be aware that massage therapy is a complement and adjunct to other treatments. Therefore, complementary medicine should not be offered as an alternative to medical treatment.

Furthermore, Sagar, Dryden and Wong⁽²⁸⁾ have highlighted some cautions for patients with cancer:

- Coagulation disorders, complicated by bruising and internal hemorrhage due to:
 - low platelet count
 - medications: coumadin, acetylsalicylic acid, heparin
- Metastases to bone, complicated by fracture/s
- Open wounds or radiation dermatitis, complicated by pain and infection.

Does Massage Spread Cancer?

There is no evidence that massage causes or contributes to metastatic disease. However, some studies have shown that breast epithelial cells may transfer to sentinel lymph nodes as a result of massage^(29, 30). Therefore, it may be prudent to avoid applying direct pressure on a tumor location, and breast cancer should be excluded before complementary medicine treatment of any breast condition.

Conclusion

It is important that massage therapists draw evidence from the available literature and design treatment plans that set achievable therapeutic goals. This article has attempted to evaluate recently published research and reviews that considered the use of massage for cancer and to summarise this evidence in the form of practice guidelines.

The use of massage for cancer pain, anxiety, nausea and vomiting, lymphedema, and carer support represents a valid complementary therapy in the management of cancer. Massage practitioners can offer patients their support with some confidence.

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