

Acupuncture for Patients with Cancer at St. Elizabeth Cancer Center

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While anti-cancer treatments are being researched and improved daily, patients with cancer are still burdened by numerous treatment-related symptoms and side effects. Cancer is an incredibly mentally and physically taxing disease.¹ People are often faced with their own mortality, which creates stress, anxiety, and existential dread.¹ On top of the symptoms from the disease itself, anti-cancer treatments are often harsh with major side effects that commonly persist after the treatment is finished.² These side-effects can include immunosuppression, nausea, peripheral neuropathy, and many others.²

Acupuncture: Integral Component of Integrative Oncology

To improve quality of life and manage side effects associated with cancer and anti-cancer treatments, the practice of Integrative Oncology was developed.³ Integrative oncology involves alleviating symptoms of cancer, managing side-effects from treatments, and addressing the mental health of patients.³ Integrative oncology is meant to supplement traditional anti-cancer treatments to create a holistic approach.³ One such treatment is acupuncture therapy, which is often used for management of physical and mental issues related to a cancer diagnosis and its treatment.^{4,5}

Numerous research studies have suggested that acupuncture may be helpful for managing:

- Cancer-related pain⁶
- Chemotherapy-induced neutropenia⁷

- Post-chemotherapy induced fatigue⁸
- Radiation-induced xerostomia⁹
- Chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting¹⁰
- Hot flashes¹¹
- Psychological well-being¹²
- Post-operative pain¹³
- Anxiety and depression.¹³

Clinical research in acupuncture continues to provide answers for patients and oncologists about the safety and effectiveness of this integrative treatment to manage cancer- and treatment-related symptoms.

Acupuncture at St. Elizabeth Cancer Center

Through an internal referral system, patients with cancer, who would benefit from acupuncture, are identified and referred to our Integrative Oncology department. Patients are then scheduled for an initial consultation and treatment from our cancer program's acupuncturist, Shilpa Dias. One year after adding acupuncture to our cancer service line, we made the decision to obtain patient feedback. A cohort of 13 patients with cancer, who received acupuncture treatment from July 2021 through March 2022, were asked to share feedback about their experience in a questionnaire and in a focus group conducted in April 2022. Data from this feedback included:

- Before the acupuncture treatment, 2 out of 13 total patients reported feeling nervous about the treatment. During the acupuncture treatment, however, no

patients (0/13) reported any discomfort from the treatment.

- About half of patients (7/13) reported feelings of relaxation during the acupuncture therapy.
- Of the 13 patients, 12 reported feeling symptoms of pain or neuropathy from their cancer or anti-cancer treatment.
- After acupuncture, 5 out of 12 total patients reported analgesic effects or relief from neuropathy symptoms.
- Nearly all patients, (12/13), reported some beneficial effect from the acupuncture therapy either during or after their treatment, including the aforementioned effects, as well as improved sleep and improved appetite.

All patients (13/13) showed improvements in their most debilitating symptoms. Common improvements in symptoms included neuropathy, pain, stress, and anxiety. Individual patients reported improvements like better handwriting, better walking, and a decrease in headaches. Overall, most patients reported the acupuncture therapy as a positive experience that helped improve their physical or mental health and general well-being. These improvements enhance the quality of life for patients with cancer.

While the majority of patients reported the acupuncture treatment to be beneficial, there were two major concerns raised. The first concern was the timing of the acupuncture treatment. Patients reported wanting to start acupuncture treatment at the beginning of their chemotherapy or radiation therapy, as opposed to later in

the course of their anti-cancer treatment. This idea was supported by our acupuncturist, Shilpa Dias. To help better manage symptoms, Dias recommended that acupuncture treatment start in the early phases of the symptoms, such as neuropathy, anxiety, insomnia, nausea, etc., rather than later. In other words, both patients and the provider believed that if acupuncture treatments were started sooner in the cancer treatment, they would be more effective.

The second major concern reported was the cost of the treatment; several patients (5/13) discontinued the acupuncture treatment, citing financial stress from the anti-cancer treatment as their reason. Non-financial reasons given for discontinuing the acupuncture treatment include travel, surgery, and resolution or improvement of symptoms.

Lack of coverage by insurance providers remains a major barrier to receiving acupuncture treatment. Currently, Medicare only covers acupuncture for lower back pain,¹⁴ and commercial insurers often impose limits on the number of visits or on the total amount of coverage.¹⁵ Patient advocacy groups are working for enhanced coverage for this safe and effective intervention for many patients with cancer. Meanwhile, healthcare systems, foundations, and donors can contribute to make a positive influence in providing low-cost services to people burdened by cancer.

In addition to the acupuncture services covered in this article, we offer several other Integrative Oncology modalities, including mindfulness meditation, yoga, Reiki, art and music therapy, and whole food nutritional education.

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