

Medical News

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Aromatherapy and Reflexology Ease Side Effects for Cancer Patients

Study shows 60-percent reduction in reported pain for women undergoing brachytherapy

COLUMBUS, Ohio – A noninvasive approach using aromatherapy and reflexology can dramatically reduce pain and anxiety for women undergoing cervical radiation therapy, according to preliminary data from a clinical study underway at [The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute](#) (OSUCCC – James).

Previously reported data suggests that 40 percent of women undergoing cervical radiation therapy experience such significant pain and anxiety that they develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For this clinical study, researchers wanted to know if integrative medicine approaches like aromatherapy and reflexology could reduce pain and anxiety commonly experienced by women undergoing brachytherapy. This type of targeted radiation is a highly effective treatment for several types of cancer that occur deep within the body. The source of the radiation is placed next to the tumor itself and avoids radiation exposure to adjacent normal tissues.

To determine whether these approaches were effective, researchers recruited 50 women undergoing brachytherapy for cervical cancer to undergo essential oil aromatherapy and 30 minutes of foot reflexology prior to their brachytherapy treatment sessions. Preliminary results show that patient-reported pain levels were reduced by 60 percent, and anxiety decreased by 20 percent.

“We have this very effective treatment approach available, but in reality these therapy sessions cause such extreme discomfort and anxiety that tolerating treatment becomes both mentally and physically stressful for patients,” says Lisa Blackburn, a clinical oncology nurse specialist and principal investigator of the study. “Our preliminary work shows that we can reduce our patients’ pain and anxiety through integrative medicine techniques, without introducing another pill or invasive procedure into their treatment regimen.”

During therapy, professional reflexologists use pressure points in the foot to target specific symptoms and to generally relax the patient. Blackburn notes that these therapies are simple to implement and have significant positive clinical effects.

“It’s nice to have something that really helps these patients that’s not another medication,” she adds. “Not only do these integrative therapy sessions have virtually no side effects, but patients required about 40 percent less pain medication than those who didn’t receive these therapies.”

Blackburn hopes aromatherapy and reflexology will become a standard of care, not just for brachytherapy patients, but for any patient who may experience pain or anxiety.

This ongoing study is supported by the OSUCCC – James. [Initial study](#) results were presented at the Oncology Nursing Society’s 43rd Annual Congress on May 18.

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About the OSUCCC – James

The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute strives to create a cancer-free world by integrating scientific research with excellence in education and patient-centered care, a strategy that leads to better methods of prevention, detection and treatment. Ohio State is one of only 49 National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Centers and one of only a few centers funded by the NCI to conduct both phase I and phase II clinical trials on novel anticancer drugs. As the cancer program’s 308-bed adult patient-care component, The James is one of the top cancer hospitals in the nation as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* and has achieved Magnet® designation, the highest honor an organization can receive for quality patient care and professional nursing practice. At 21 floors with more than 1.1 million square feet, The James is a transformational facility that fosters collaboration and integration of cancer research and clinical cancer care. For more information, visit cancer.osu.edu.