

Acupuncture, massage helpful after cancer surgery

By Amy Norton *Wed Apr 11, 12:36 PM ET*

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A combination of acupuncture and massage may help ease pain and depression symptoms after cancer surgery, a new study suggests.

Acupuncture has been shown in many studies to ease pain, and there's growing evidence that it helps quell post-surgery nausea. Massage, meanwhile, has been shown in certain studies to aid cancer patients' anxiety.

Until now, however, no studies have tried combining the two therapies for people undergoing cancer surgery -- a physically and emotionally difficult process.

The new study included 138 patients who were randomly assigned to have either standard post-operative care or standard care plus acupuncture and massage for 2 days following their cancer surgery.

Overall, the study found, patients who received the therapies had a steeper decline in pain over 3 days, as well as fewer symptoms of depression. The findings are published in the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*.

"We can say that adding acupuncture and massage definitely helped," said lead study author Dr. Wolf E. Mehling, an assistant professor of family and community medicine at the University of California San Francisco.

It's possible, he told Reuters Health, that the patients in the acupuncture/massage group did better simply because they received extra attention, and not because of a specific effect of the therapies.

On the other hand, there's evidence from other research that acupuncture and massage have relevant physiological effects. For example, Mehling noted, animal research has found that massage can increase blood levels of oxytocin, a hormone with pain- and anxiety-relieving actions; increased oxytocin levels might counter stress-hormone elevations around the time surgery, Mehling explained.

Similarly, there's evidence that acupuncture triggers the release of nervous system chemicals that help dull pain.

Whether the therapies will become a widely used part of cancer treatment, following surgery or in other contexts, remains to be seen. A few major cancer centers in the U.S. currently offer acupuncture and massage to inpatients and outpatients, Mehling said.

One question is who should pay for it. Centers can offer the therapies as part of their standard care, or charge patients extra for it, Mehling noted. While patients might be convinced that acupuncture or massage are worth a try, he pointed out, hospital administrators and insurance plans will likely need more research evidence that the therapies are worth the cost.

SOURCE: Journal of Pain and Symptom Management, March 2007.

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