Predictors of Use of Complementary and Alternative Therapies Among Patients With Cancer

Judith M. Fouladbakhsh, MSN, APRN, BC, AHN-C, CHTP, Manfred Stommel, PhD, Barbara A. Given, RN, PhD, FAAN, and Charles W. Given, PhD

Key Points...

- The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies continues to increase in general populations and among those with cancer. It is important to understand the factors that predict use of these nonconventional methods of care and symptom management.
- In our study of patients with lung, breast, colon, or prostate cancer, nearly 30% used CAM therapies. The two most frequently used CAM therapies were herbal and vitamin supplements and spiritual healing.
- Factors that predict CAM use include gender, marital status, cancer stage, cancer treatment, and number of severe symptoms.
- To promote comprehensive quality care, nurses should assess for CAM use and increase their understanding of which CAM therapies patients are using and why.

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies has increased dramatically since the 1990s in the United States and other industrialized countries around the world, in general populations and among those with cancer (Astin, 1998; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Ernst & Cassileth, 1998; Kessler et al., 2001; World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). Population studies have indicated that CAM therapy use ranges from 42%–75% in the United States (Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004; Eisenberg et al.), with visits to CAM practitioners exceeding total visits to primary care physicians and out-of-pocket expenditures estimated at more than $34 billion. The percentage of people using CAM therapies is estimated to be 48% in Australia, 70% in Canada, 38% in Belgium, and 75% in France (WHO), reinforcing the perception of a secular shift in attitudes toward healthcare services and health-seeking behavior.

Data from a nationally representative sample of adult U.S. residents revealed that 75% have used CAM at some time in their lives for health reasons, with 62% using CAM in the preceding 12 months (Barnes et al., 2004). CAM therapies used most frequently include personal prayer (43%), prayer...