Relief of Symptoms, Side Effects, and Psychological Distress Through Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Women With Breast Cancer

Cecile A. Lengacher, RN, PhD, Mary P. Bennett, DNSc, RN, Kevin E. Kip, PhD, Lois Gonzalez, PhD, ARNP, Paul Jacobsen, PhD, and Charles E. Cox, MD

Purpose/Objectives: To identify use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) for relief of symptoms and side effects among women diagnosed with breast cancer and to identify demographic and clinical factors associated with the use of CAM in these patients.

Design: A descriptive, cross-sectional survey.

Setting: Clinics and community groups in the Tampa Bay area and community groups in a rural midwestern area.

Sample: A convenience sample of 105 predominantly Caucasian women (X age = 59 years) with a diagnosis of breast cancer was recruited from the Tampa Bay area and a rural midwestern area.

Methods: The instrument used to gather the data was the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Cancer Treatment and the effectiveness of CAM treatments in this context have not been well documented. Complementary medicine is defined as therapy that is used for symptom management and to improve quality of life while patients with cancer are undergoing chemotherapy. There are many CAM therapies that may be helpful to relieve patients’ symptoms related to treatment and psychological distress related to their cancer.

Key Points . . .

➤ Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies are being used for symptom and side-effect relief, to reduce psychological stress, to gain control over treatment among women, and because of dissatisfaction with traditional medical care.

➤ Use of diet and nutritional supplements and stress-reducing techniques was associated with previous chemotherapy and having more than a high school education.

➤ Assessment of reasons for CAM use is an important consideration and may have implications for the cancer treatments patients are receiving.

➤ Effective implementation of CAM therapies may relieve physical symptoms or psychological distress or give patients a feeling of control over their illness.

Cecile A. Lengacher, RN, PhD, is a professor and director of evaluation in the College of Nursing at the University of South Florida in Tampa; Mary P. Bennett, DNSc, RN, is an assistant dean and associate professor in the School of Nursing at Indiana State University in Terre Haute; Kevin E. Kip, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania; Lois Gonzalez, PhD, ARNP, is an associate professor and director of the master’s program at the University of South Florida; Paul Jacobsen, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Florida and program leader in the Psychosocial and Palliative Care Program at the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer and Research Institute in Tampa; and Charles E. Cox, MD, is a professor of surgery at the University of South Florida and breast surgical oncologist at the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer and Research Institute. (Mention of specific products and opinions related to those products do not indicate or imply endorsement by the Oncology Nursing Forum or the Oncology Nursing Society.)