

Animal-Assisted Activity Among Patients With Cancer: Effects on Mood, Fatigue, Self-Perceived Health, and Sense of Coherence

Rebecca A. Johnson, PhD, RN, FAAN, Richard L. Meadows, DVM, DABVP, Jennifer S. Haubner, RN, BSN, and Kathleen Sevedge, RN, MA, AOCN®, CNS

Purpose/Objectives: To identify to what extent an animal-assisted activity (i.e., visits with a dog) affects the mood, self-perceived health, and sense of coherence among patients undergoing radiation therapy.

Design: Pretest/post-test between and within groups.

Setting: Radiation oncology units of two hospitals in a mid-sized, midwestern city.

Sample: 30 adult patients undergoing nonpalliative radiation therapy.

Methods: After giving informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to receive 12 dog visits, 12 human visits, or 12 quiet reading sessions over a four-week period.

Findings: No statistically significant differences were found; however, compared with others their age, patients receiving dog visits viewed their health as improved over the four-week period. Participants described each of the three activities as beneficial. The study is primarily useful as a basis for planning additional research.

Conclusions: The study warrants replication with a larger sample to determine applicability of animal-assisted activity in patients with cancer who are undergoing radiation therapy.

Implications for Nursing: Patients may want and express benefit from animal-assisted activity dog visits, but the outcomes of the visits may not be measurable. Nurses should assess to what extent patients believe that such visits are beneficial by asking them. The visits may be valued by patients as helping to relieve their anxiety and as distractions from their disease and therapy.

Key Points . . .

- ▶ No statistically significant association was found between dog visits and mood, sense of coherence, or self-perceived health.
- ▶ Participants perceived visit and reading sessions as helping to decrease their anxiety and to provide distractions.
- ▶ Participants recommended visits or reading sessions to other patients early in the radiation therapy process.

pate in their treatment as much as they can in the context of advanced technology (Jordan & Delunas, 2001). That need has stimulated interest in and use of a wide array of complementary therapies. For example, in a sample of 453 patients with cancer, 83% had used at least one complementary therapy (Richardson, Sanders, Palmer, Greisinger, & Singletary, 2000). In a classic study, the therapies were found to help patients participate in their care (Coss, McGrath & Caggiano, 1998).

Animal-Assisted Activity

Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, and Sevedge (2003) argued that animal-assisted activity (AAA) (i.e., pet visitation) meets

Rebecca A. Johnson, PhD, RN, FAAN, is the Millsap Professor of Gerontological Nursing in the Sinclair School of Nursing and director of the Research Center for Human Animal Interaction in the College of Veterinary Medicine, and Richard L. Meadows, DVM, DABVP, is a teaching associate professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine, both at the University of Missouri–Columbia; and Jennifer S. Haubner, RN, BSN, is a nurse clinician in surgical oncology breast cancer research and, at the time of the study, Kathleen Sevedge, RN, MA, AOCN®, CNS, was a clinical support coordinator, both in the Ellis Fischel Cancer Center at the University of Missouri Health Care in Columbia. Sevedge now is director of cancer support services in the John and Dorothy Morgan Cancer Center at Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network in Allentown, PA. The authors received financial support from a University of Missouri–Columbia Comprehensive Cancer Center seed grant fund. (Submitted November 2006. Accepted for publication August 9, 2007.)

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Nurses consistently seek intervention strategies to reduce cancer symptoms and treatment-associated stress and to facilitate healing and feelings of wellness. Interventions often are considered complementary to traditional cancer treatment. Cancer remains the cause of one in four deaths in the United States and is the second-leading cause of death. Estimates indicate that about 1.4 million people are newly diagnosed with cancer and 560,000 die from the disease annually (American Cancer Society, 2007). Despite those statistics, patients with cancer are living longer and may undergo multiple rounds of therapy during treatment of their initial episode and later recurrences, making a wide range of interventions potentially beneficial.

Literature Review

Complementary Therapy

To reduce stress and anxiety associated with cancer, patients need to retain a sense of control over their bodies and partici-