Novel Intervention With Acupuncture for Anorexia and Cachexia in Patients With Gastrointestinal Tract Cancers: A Feasibility Study

Saunjoo L. Yoon, PhD, RN, Oliver Grundmann, PhD, Joseph J. Williams, AP, DOM, and Gwen Carriere, ARNP, MSN

Despite advancements in the management of side effects and supportive care, many patients with cancer still suffer from side effects related to treatment interventions and the progression of disease. Most significantly, patients struggle to maintain optimal nutrition and a healthy diet and weight. More than half of patients undergoing treatment experience malnutrition, anorexia, and weight loss (Smith, Malinauskas, Garner, & Barber-Heidal, 2008), which are independent factors that contribute to a lower survival rate, decreased quality of life, and functional impairment (Andreyev, Norman, Oates, & Cunningham, 1998; Fearon et al., 2011; Tisdale, 2009). More than 15% of weight loss leads to impaired physiologic function, and weight loss of more than 30% body mass can predict death in patients with cancer (Tisdale, 2002). In addition, studies have shown that patients with solid tumors, particularly gastrointestinal (GI) cancers, experience severe weight loss (Dewys et al., 1980; Tan & Fearon, 2008), and another study revealed that participants who lost at least 2.5 kg (about 3% of baseline body weight loss) during six to eight weeks demonstrated lower Karnofsky Performance Status scores and triceps skinfold thickness compared to patients who maintained a stable weight (O’Gorman, McMillan, & McArdle, 1999). Therefore, the evidence suggests that food intake and weight loss may help to predict functioning and prognosis of patients with GI cancers (Fearon, Voss, & Hustead, 2006).

Clinicians have emphasized the importance of nutritional support for patients with cancer (Burden, Hill, Shaffer, & Todd, 2010). For example, clinicians often use pharmacologic therapies, such as progesterone (megestrol acetate [MA]) and corticosteroids, to improve appetite, and more powerful drugs are continually under investigation (Mantovani & Madeddu, 2010; Mantovani, Madeddu, & Macciò, 2013). In addition to pharmacologic therapies, clinicians frequently use...