



Yoga and Nursing in Cancer Care

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Photo by Betsy Denson

Cancer and its treatment can be extremely stressful physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As a holistic oncology nurse, I've found teaching restorative, therapeutic yoga offers a safe, gentle practice that is especially helpful for patients with cancer. In the clinical setting, and especially in oncology, it is important that the practice of yoga is designed to be safe and accessible for everyone, including those recovering from injury or illness. Yoga and nursing are both holistic; we treat the entire individual, not just the disease. Oncology nurses, with training, can learn to use yoga as an intervention to help their patients decrease stress and reduce side-effects of medical treatment, thus improving their quality of life and sense of well-being.

Many cancer patients are turning to yoga because it helps them realize how a person with a serious illness, such as cancer, can connect to their body and begin to experience self-empowerment and well-being, instead of "running away" from their threatened body (Boucher, 1999). The practice of yoga can offer physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits to patients with cancer.

Evidence-Based Benefits

Emerging research shows yoga use by cancer patients can improve overall well-being in addition to relieving stress, anxiety, and some of the negative side effects related to cancer treatment. The Society for Integrative Oncology recently published guidelines about the safety and effectiveness of complementary therapies, specifically for women with breast cancer. They gave yoga a grade "A", the top level rating for strength of evidence, and recommended it for improving mood in women undergoing radiation and/or chemotherapy and for fatigued breast cancer patients (Greenlee et al., 2014).

Studies done by the Integrative Medicine Program at MD Anderson found yoga to be beneficial in:

- improving sleep outcomes,

- decreasing side effects of cancer treatment,
- improving physical functioning aspects of quality of life,
- helping patients find meaning from the illness experience as they transition into cancer survivorship. (Chaoul, et al., 2015)

Yoga is included as a component of the Oncology Nursing Society's *Putting Evidence into Practice* (PEP) series. "Yoga has been examined as an intervention for anxiety, depression, chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, hot flashes, cognitive impairment, sleep-wake disturbances, pain, and fatigue in patients with cancer. It has also been examined as an intervention for caregiver strain and burden," and the PEP guidelines list yoga as "most likely effective" for both fatigue and anxiety (ONS, 2015).

Oncology nurses already use many evidence-based interventions to help their patients deal with the side effects of cancer treatment. With training, nurses can easily incorporate yoga into their practice or as part of an integrated care plan. The following are some examples of when yoga interventions could be used in the oncology setting:

- during a painful procedure, to help reduce anxiety.
- while waiting for test results, to aid emotional well-being.
- during chemotherapy to help reduce nausea.
- to improve levels of cancer-related fatigue, which is one of the most frequently reported side-effects by cancer survivors. (Buffart et al., 2012)

Patients can be introduced to yoga either by working with them one-on-one or by offering a group class in the clinical setting (Sisk & Fonteyn, 2015).

In addition, nurses can use yoga as a self-care intervention to promote personal health and to be a healing presence. Working in the oncology setting can be stressful, putting nurses at risk for burnout and compassion fatigue (Corso, 2012). Yoga is one way that oncology nurses can take care of themselves to reduce work-related anxiety and restore their personal well-

being so that they are better prepared to offer safe, effective care to their patients. Simple yogic techniques are easy to learn and have been shown to reduce stress and burnout (Kemper, et al., 2011). Once nurses have started their own yoga practice and feel confident, they can then use the techniques in their clinical practice with their patients.

Teaching Yoga in the Clinical Setting

I have been an oncology nurse for 20 years and have been practicing yoga almost just as long. While experiencing the many benefits of yoga for myself, I became interested in how yoga may benefit the patients I was caring for. I took a yoga teacher training with the sole intention of starting a yoga class for my patients at the hospital and quickly realized that yoga and nursing are a great combination. I started researching how yoga could be used in my nursing practice and discovered the exciting new field of YogaNursing (see box at right).

In 2012, I started a chair yoga class at the community hospital where I work as an oncology nurse navigator. All cancer patients are invited to attend for free. Participants are required to get their doctor's approval and sign a release before attending. Everyone is encouraged to practice at his or her own pace. The class is designed for patients who are undergoing treatment and may be struggling with adverse side effects. Participants do not need to be feeling well when they come to class, and previous yoga experience or good coordination are not required.

A typical class has 10-15 participants. The classroom is set up with a circle of chairs, dimmed lights, and relaxing music playing. Participants are told to listen to their bodies and to only do the postures and movements that they can tolerate, avoiding anything that does not feel good. Class starts with a few moments to ground oneself and turn attention inward. Next, breathing exercises are explained and practiced. They are then led through gentle poses that are all done in a chair to reconnect them with their bodies. Finally, they are guided through a relaxation meditation.

Feedback from participants has been very positive. One person who was being treated for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma had started experiencing discomfort from her chemo port and rib pain as the result of a car accident. She stated that the breathing exercises she had learned in the yoga class helped to ease her pain after the accident. Another participant noted the emotional benefits of attending: "Yoga class is like a support group since we are going through the same kind of experiences and can relate to one another" (Sisk & Fonteyn, 2015).

Overall, I have found that practicing restorative yoga, such as YogaNursing, in the clinical setting can offer physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits to not only patients with cancer, but to the nurses who teach it. As holistic nurses, we understand the importance of healing interventions that enhance body-mind-emotion-spirit-environment. We can easily learn how to safely integrate yoga as an evidence-based intervention into our self-care and the care of cancer patients in our clinical practice.

What is YogaNursing?

In the clinical setting, where getting on the floor is not always practical for patients, practicing a physical activity such as traditional yoga can be challenging and uncomfortable. Annette Tersigni, RN, a holistic health nurse and medical yoga therapist, developed a holistic nursing adjunct therapy known as YogaNursing®, which is especially designed for nurses and their patients. It incorporates a combination of seated stretches, gentle movement, deep breathing, and relaxation techniques with the goal of uniting "the ancient wisdom of yoga with the science of modern nursing" (Tersigni, 2012). More than 400 nurses have trained in YogaNursing. Many have begun to teach yoga practices to patients and their families in hospitals, outpatient clinics, and in private sessions as an adjunct therapy in various fields of nursing.

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