Acupuncture and Cancer  by Yan Zhang Ph.D. L.Ac.

Acupuncture is an ancient art of therapy that originated in China thousands of years ago. It has been used by nearly one-third of the world (countries throughout Asia, Europe and South America) as a primary care system and in many more countries as non-conventional therapy for 200 years. It was introduced as a type of complementary and alternative medicine in the U.S. in the 1970’s. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, an estimated 3.1 million U.S. adults and 150,000 children had used acupuncture in the previous year.

According to TCM, health is achieved by maintaining the body in a “balanced state”. Illness or disease occurs when the balance is disrupted. Acupuncture treats the person as a whole by rebalancing the body. It works based on the Traditional Chinese Medicine theory that Qi (pronounced like Chee and meaning vital energy) and blood circulate in the body through a system of channels (the meridians) which connect the internal organs with external organs and tissues. By stimulating certain points (called acupoints) of the body surface where meridians reach, the flow of Qi and blood can be regulated, balance regained, and diseases treated with very few side-effects. Some people feel energized by treatment, while others feel relaxed. The primary stimulation method uses metallic, solid, hair-thin and disposable needles, but acupuncturist may also use other methods such as moxibustion, cupping device, heat lamp and electrical devices to enhance therapeutic effects. Treatment may take place over a period of several weeks or more. Some insurance companies may cover the costs of acupuncture, while others may not.

Acupuncture is used to treat a wide range of illnesses and ailments, but is not used by itself as a treatment for cancer. Rather, it is used in combination with conventional cancer treatment options to help relieve symptoms related to cancer and cancer treatment. Acupuncture is used by cancer patients predominantly for pain management and nausea and vomiting (N/V) control. Some patients also find that acupuncture helps relieve stress, fatigue, neuropathy and other symptoms that affect a patient’s quality of life, including weight loss, anxiety, depression, insomnia, poor appetite, dry mouth, constipation and diarrhea. Accordingly, most acupuncture research in cancer patients has been conducted to evaluate the effects of acupuncture on symptom management rather than the disease itself. The most convincing research evidence has emerged from studies of the management of chemotherapy-induced N/V. Although most of these studies were positive and demonstrated the effectiveness of acupuncture in cancer pain control, the findings have limited significance because of methodological weaknesses.

Although millions of people are treated with acupuncture every year, as with all therapies, acupuncture carries certain risks. For cancer patients who are interested in trying this CAM modality, there are a few things to be considered in advance. First, people who have bleeding disorder or low white blood cell counts, or take blood thinner are at higher risk of minor bleeding. However, when the bleeding occurs, holding a cotton ball for about one minute over the site of puncture is usually sufficient to stop the bleeding. Second, some patients have a conscious or unconscious fear of needles which can produce dizziness and other symptoms of anxiety (sometimes called needle-shock). If that happens, the acupuncturist will remove the needles and ask the patient to lay down to reduce the likelihood of fainting. Last but not the least, complications can result from inadequate sterilization of needles and from improper delivery of treatments. So, it is always important to find a qualified acupuncturist practitioner. The conventional health care providers can be a resource for referral to acupuncturists. In addition, national acupuncture organizations such as NCCAOM-National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine may provide referrals to acupuncturists.

Sources:
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