

Creating comfort

Complementary care offers relief from common side effects



FRANCISCA HEMBREE WAS STRUCK WITH SEVERAL COMMON SIDE EFFECTS as she underwent surgery and radiation during her fight against breast cancer. Hembree's stomach hurt, her energy level was low, and there was pain in her arm. Seeking relief and hoping to avoid more medication, the Reno resident turned to acupuncture.

"I had always been interested in holistic medicine," Hembree says. "I wanted to try complementary care for the side effects of cancer treatment."

After several weekly acupuncture sessions, she began to see results. Now, with her symptoms under control, Hembree receives acupuncture once every three weeks for maintenance.

"I think the more options you have, the better you can manage your own care," says Dr. Howard Chen, who practices family medicine with Renown Medical Group and also is trained in traditional Chinese acupuncture, as well as medical acupuncture.

The notion that various methods of complementary care can lead to increased wellness and comfort seems to be catching on among breast cancer patients, as well as their nurses and physicians.

"Complementary therapy aims to treat the whole person, not just the disease," says Bobbi Gillis, a nurse of 30 years.

Gillis serves as breast health nurse navigator at Renown Institute for Cancer, where she guides breast cancer patients through the process of treatment and recovery.

"I do refer a lot of our patients to complementary care for the mind and body," she says.

According to Chen, several women with breast cancer see him for acupuncture on a regular basis. These patients, including Hembree, are all at various stages in the treatment and recovery process.

"Many breast cancer patients have undergone either chemotherapy or radiation," Chen says, "and acupuncture can be used to alleviate quite a few side effects from these treatments."

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— Dr. Howard Chen

“We use it in conjunction with the care they’re getting from their primary physicians and oncologists,” he adds.

Common breast cancer treatments — such as chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery — can lead to side effects including fatigue, nausea, lack of vitality, pain, dry mouth, dry eyes, diminished appetite, constipation, and neuropathy.

“Many women with breast cancer want to feel better without taking more medicine,” Chen says. “They’re seeking useful alternatives.”

At Carson Tahoe Regional Healthcare’s cancer resource center, several forms of complementary care are available to cancer patients of all kinds, including those with breast cancer. The center coordinates yoga and exercise classes, massage sessions, support groups, and more.

“I’m very selective about the programs we offer here,” says Ann Proffitt, an 18-year survivor of breast cancer and supervisor of the Cancer Resource Center. “I want to present our patients with options we know can be beneficial.”

Yoga is used to help promote good breathing techniques, aid in relaxation, and reduce stress. The exercise classes work to improve range of motion and help patients regain their strength and vitality.

Massage therapy can reduce pain and swelling, as well as stress and anxiety, thereby speeding the healing process — and there may be more to it than that.

“Touching is very important for cancer patients, because sometimes they feel that people can stand off a bit,” Proffitt says, “so there’s some healing in that.”

A form of energy work called Healing Touch also is gaining popularity among breast cancer patients for its ability to decrease pain and induce a deep state of relaxation. The technique involves the placement of hands lightly on or above the skin and a focused direction of energy.

“Oncology patients are my main clientele,” says Dionne Bloomfield, a practitioner of Healing Touch who offers her services free at Renown Institute for Cancer. “With breast cancer patients, I really focus on the part of the body that’s been affected, such as the site of radiation burns or a surgical incision.”

Hembree received Healing Touch, and says the energy work left her with a relaxed and peaceful state of mind.

“When you have breast cancer, there are so many things on your mind, and you’re overwhelmed with all the information they give you,” she says. “If something can relax you and make you feel a little bit more comfortable, then it’s worth it.”

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