

# Acupuncture and Cancer Care

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Acupuncture is an excellent healing modality for every aspect of cancer. Today, many people think of acupuncture for relieving back pain, quitting smoking, or easing nausea from chemotherapy. But there are many ways that acupuncture can play a key role in recovery from cancer, regardless of the course of medical treatment. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center has offered acupuncture since 1999 and has documented the effectiveness of

acupuncture treatments for post-operative pain as well as many lingering chemotherapy and radiation side effects. In my acupuncture clinic, I commonly see positive responses to conditions such as constipation, diarrhea, low blood counts, pain caused by incisions, neuropathy, anxiety, depression, reactions from steroids, and insomnia.

The period of time following breast cancer treatment is one of significant transition. Women are coming to the end of an extremely challenging time and often want to integrate positive self-care, such as healthy diet, exercise, and meditation. Acupuncture is an outstanding choice for healing during this time since it works on the level of the body, mind, and spirit. Many acupuncturists can make recommendations about these changes and also provide exceptional emotional support.

Choosing the right acupuncturist is key to your experience. Each practitioner has his or her own style and a good fit is essential. If you have a friend who can recommend a practitioner they see, that is a starting place. I would also recommend looking at acupuncturists' websites and seeing what their specialties are. Each acupuncturist is unique, and it's advisable to call several to see who has a schedule and location compatible with yours. Acupuncture is an intimate modality, and it's important to make sure that you like your practitioner! I would also ask them about their experience working with cancer patients. You will probably learn a lot. It's important that your practitioner be a licensed acupuncturist (L.Ac.) and be certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). You could also inquire about any continuing education they've had in oncology. Don't feel shy asking questions about their approach to treatment. **Update:** Women who have had surgery and other treatments for breast cancer are at risk for lymphedema, and it is important to make sure that your acupuncturist

knows not to insert needles in the chest, arm, or back in the areas where lymph nodes have been removed. Current research does not show that acupuncture can prevent or treat existing lymphedema. If you start receiving acupuncture and don't feel comfortable with your practitioner, don't hesitate to find someone else who will better complement your recovery support team!

In my clinic, I find people to be particularly responsive to acupuncture when dealing with cancer. From the anxiety of waiting for a diagnosis, through surgical or chemical treatment, to establishing a new normal afterwards, acupuncture has much to offer. Acupuncture is widely believed to support the body's ability to heal. Acupuncture can help clear the effects of surgeries with protocols for healing scar tissue and assisting range of motion. **Update:** While it is customary to avoid needling the quadrant of the body that has had lymph node removal, if a client is comfortable with it, I offer gentle acupressure can be used on the area to keep energy flowing throughout the body. Another technique that I find to be very helpful for certain clients is "cupping." This involves the very light placement of glass or silicone cups on the body for the purpose of pain relief, detoxification, and for some clients, lymphatic drainage assistance in areas of the body that have not undergone lymph node removal. In my clinic, I never use heat or extreme suction on the cups. I commonly use this painless technique in conjunction with acupuncture after medical treatment to detoxify from medications and release tight tissue and muscle. Not every patient is a candidate for all treatments, and it is essential that treatment is tailored to your specific needs. What is most important is that your acupuncturist respects your concerns and cares about your comfort and safety.

The time following diagnosis and treatment is often a very emotional period deserving a great deal of compassion and support. Mood changes are common, including anxiety and depression — sometimes resulting in insomnia. These emotional issues respond very well to acupuncture treatments and the therapeutic relationship. At a spirit level, I see women who have experienced loss and trauma, but also possess an emerging sense of connection and a realization of support and strength. In addition, there is the gradual process of seeing oneself as being strong and resilient after having been sick or in pain.

During my treatments, I typically combine some of the researched Sloan-Kettering protocols for symptom relief (such as hot flashes, joint pain, or fatigue) with acupuncture points selected for my patients' individual constitution. Depending on the situation, I might use a combination of needles, a TDP infrared lamp (to help circulation and release tight tissue), liniments, foot massage, aromatherapy, or whatever else seems most beneficial that day. Some people require fewer needles than others, not everyone enjoys essential oils, and not everyone responds the same way to sessions. Frequency of treatments varies between patients and stage of treatment.

From a practitioner's perspective, the work I do with patients who are dealing with cancer is some of the most rewarding. I experience this as inspirational work, a chance to accompany women who have already faced many fears and pain. My role as an acupuncturist affords me the opportunity to help my patients rebuild, and to identify the virtues they possess that support them during this journey. The intimacy of our acupuncture sessions and the time spent is particularly helpful and nurturing. In addition to being a

powerful complementary medicine, acupuncture provides patients with a unique opportunity to be known and cared for.