

Cancer Up the Wazoo

Stories, information, and hope
for those affected by anal cancer

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Chapter 17

Integrative Medicine: The Ultimate Holistic Approach to Cancer Care

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A study released in 2017 found that people who forgo standard medical treatment for their common and curable cancer are more than twice as likely to die within five years (Johnson, Park, Gross & Yu). So I ask, why are people still choosing alternative medicine and forgoing conventional treatments like chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and hormone treatments? In this chapter, we explore this topic and examine what may be the best approach to treating cancer—that being an integrative one.

When faced with a cancer diagnosis, many thoughts go through the mind. A typical reaction is, “Will I survive this? Am I going to die?” Considering today’s conventional medicine and technological advances, it is possible the person will survive, depending on how advanced the cancer is. If they catch it early enough, there is a higher chance of survival. Add some safe, complementary therapies that don’t interfere with the conventional treatment, and we have what I call the best of both worlds—Integrative Medicine.

Cancer causes a feeling of loss of control in its victim. The person’s body is attacking itself, and that attack could prove fatal. The thoughts of death and loss of the future, future pain or possible disfigurement, and the prospect of cancer treatment side effects and how this will affect loved ones can heighten feelings of anxiety,

worry, stress, grief, loss, fear, and panic, and can significantly affect one's overall sense of well-being. Mind-body connection activities like yoga (for caregivers and family members, too!) can help give a sense of control and peace and can help calm the mind and get the emotions in check. It provides a person with a sense of control.

Distress is so often caused by painful memories, guilt over things from the past, or anxieties regarding the future. Mindfulness and meditation can bring a person into the present moment. It has been proven that mind-body connection exercises increase quality of life and sense of well-being. Many of these therapies can work synergistically, meaning they have even more benefit when used together. The thought of meditation daunts some people as they imagine it calls for the concentration of the Buddha. But that is not so; there are many very approachable forms of meditation, and all can find a style that works for them.

In today's cancer world, there seem to be two camps. There are the "conventional medicine" folks and the "alternative medicine" camp. There are strong feelings and opinions on both sides. I have been involved in these kinds of debates. People who believe in alternative methods and medicines try to convince those who have cancer that "The Big Three" (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and surgery) standard treatments are no more than poison, or "burn and slash," and they are not good for us. Added to the Big Three now are hormone therapy, immunotherapy (such as Keytruda), and targeted therapies including monoclonal antibodies and small molecule inhibitors such as Herceptin for Her2 breast cancer—so now it's the "Big Six" perhaps?

Those championing alternative medicines tend to believe there is a better and more natural way to cure cancer, and although they mean well, they may make the person who has considered the conventional route of treatment doubt themselves. The person who trusts the reported efficacy of standard treatment sometimes feels as though she or he has to try to convince the alternative folks that there is no evidence to prove their theory works. Many supporters of alternative treatment only will come back with all kinds of anecdotal (informal or unscientific) instances of how "someone's cancer was treated, and the person was cured" using, as examples, medical marijuana or Essiac® tea.

There are cases of survival (and death) on both sides. Some people survive cancer using standard treatment, and yes, some survive using unconventional approaches. The problem is we don't have scientific evidence to prove or disprove, for example, "medical marijuana cures all cancers" (because there are over 100 types of cancers). However, for example, we DO have evidence that Essiac® tea is NOT SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN to treat or prevent cancer.

Cancer researcher/psychotherapist Kelly A. Turner, Ph.D. has studied the commonalities of people who experience a radical remission, and she has published a book that explains more about the nine key factors shared by most people who survive cancer. The *New York Times* bestseller by Turner, *Radical Remission, Surviving Cancer Against All Odds* (2014), reveals some intriguing information on these factors that can make a real difference.

These nine key remission factors are related to (in no particular order):

- ✓ taking control of your health (adopting an active role, embracing change, and conquering resistance),
- ✓ changing your diet,
- ✓ using herbs and supplements,
- ✓ following your intuition,
- ✓ clearing emotional blockages,
- ✓ increasing positive emotions,
- ✓ seeking social supports,
- ✓ embracing spiritual growth, and
- ✓ having strong reasons for living.

Turner believes most people will need "conventional medicine to outrun cancer." I found this book very encouraging and recommend it.

When I was diagnosed with anal cancer, I wanted to know what my options were. I spoke with an oncologist who told me the approach shown to be 70% effective for my type of cancer was called the Nigro Protocol. This was a chemoradiation approach, which did not include surgery. He said he wanted me to "keep all my parts." I felt fairly confident this was the way to go.

However, I still wanted to know if there was a gentler and kinder, more natural cure. My online research led me to discover a woman, Corrie Yelland, who states she has successfully used cannabis oil (marijuana) to treat her anal cancer. She explains that she had one diagnostic surgery and one biopsy. The doctors told her she would need to have radiation treatments. After researching what pelvic radiation could do to her, Corrie decided against it and turned to cannabis oil. She took it internally and topically—ingesting cannabis oil on a daily basis and inserting gelatin capsules filled with a mixture of the oil and olive oil into her anus (cannabis oil suppositories). She believes it has kept her alive and cured her of cancer. She also states, “I have helped coach quite a few others to an ‘all clear’ status with anal cancer . . . using only the oil.” Cannabis oil is not an approved cancer treatment, and in some jurisdictions, it is still illegal to use.

I even arranged to have a talk with a cancer treatment clinic in Tijuana, Mexico. After reminding me some five times via email they would call me at 4:00 pm on a specified day, I didn't hear from them. I had gone on to do something else, then they called at 4:35 pm. I missed the call, and they never tried contacting me again.

I tried to find a more natural option to eliminate my squamous cell carcinoma but came up against a brick wall. The “secret” (only known to those who have a web link address) online anal cancer support group I was a member of supported me no matter what I decided, but they said the ladies who took the alternative route were no longer alive. Even the nurses and healthcare professionals in the group said the treatment was brutal, but no other option was scientifically proven to be more successful. Lamentably, when people pushing natural programs respond to people who have cancer in these casual, disorganized ways, it's difficult to take it seriously enough to feel confident about such alternatives.

I have concluded regarding these alternative therapy cancer clinics that they are perhaps helpful to those who have no other options or those who are willing to take a risk and try new and emerging treatment modalities which are not yet available to them locally or scientifically proven. If the doctor or specialists feel there is nothing more they can do (perhaps the cancer has spread too far)

and the person wishes to pursue other options, then this is where these types of therapies come in. Treatments at these clinics may cost thousands of dollars, and they come with no guarantee, so it's a risk the person has to take (sadly, it's not only "Big Pharma" that wants to line their pockets).

People who have a late-stage case of cancer, incurable cancer, or are approaching the end of life can be very vulnerable to "snake oil" salespeople. Those offering a magic potion or elixir, appearing just at the right place at the right time, can easily convince a terrified, weakened, stressed, suffering person to hand over his or her cash in hopes of a miracle cure. Naïve and desperately hopeful people can easily fall prey to frauds, quacks, and charlatans. The website called Quackwatch (quackwatch.org) has an impressive listing of many types of health claims, and you can search for anything you have heard of to see what their researched take is on it.

We all want to believe there is a simple solution to cancer. We donate money, raise funds for, and even pray for a cure. Unfortunately, some believe in cancer conspiracy theories, that there is a "hidden cure," and doctors and pharmaceutical companies are holding it back for personal gain. Some believe there is more money to be made by the medical system by not releasing this supposed "cure" for cancer. Many point fingers at Big Pharma and spread malicious propaganda that there is a conspiracy against the general public, while at the same time selling their unproven, potentially unsafe "cures." Some feel the pharmaceutical industry is not working for the benefit of the people; instead, they are cashing in for their own benefit. I don't believe this to be true. If and when there is a cure for cancer (which means there would need to be many cures as there are many types) I am sure the researchers will rejoice and get a Nobel Prize! Hopefully, these cures are just around the corner.

Until then, we have to rely on what scientific research is telling us. Evidence-based solutions, those tested in labs and done objectively with proper research methods, are the best bet we have toward increasing our chances for a cure and our survival rates (living long with or after cancer). There is a group of researchers who go over all the scientific cancer studies that have been done and come up with an overall take on the situation. This group of scientists

prepares “Cochrane Reviews.” Many subjects can be found on their website (*cochrane.org*). For example, there were over 40 articles on “diet and cancer.”

During my research investigations, I have come to realize the scientific studies must be looked at very carefully. For example, if a pharmaceutical company is providing the research grant (funding) to determine the efficacy (success) of one of their newest chemotherapy drugs, we can be sure if the results are favorable, we need to look carefully at how the study was done. This is true for any research. How many subjects were in the study? Were they randomly selected? Was it done as a double-blind study (neither participants or experimenters knew who had the treatment versus placebo)? Was there a control group (a group that received usual or standard care)? This is true for any research that may have a bias (favoring one side). This is also known as a conflict of interest. For example, if the study was funded by the pharmaceutical company that makes the drug, they will most likely be looking for favorable results. If the study was peer-reviewed, examined by other experts in the field, that’s a big plus. You will see quality studies published in peer-reviewed journals. All of these factors must be taken into account when doing your research. For more on this, check out the article by Jeremy Adam Smith, “Ten Questions to Ask about Scientific Studies” (2015).

When others give suggestions of magic potions, they feel they are genuinely helping you in your journey to heal and overcome your illness. It eases their stress, providing a sense of some control over the situation and that of being helpful. We are all human, and we all want to feel in control; one of our primary instincts is to survive. We seek answers to why things happen and answers to our problems. Without those answers, we can feel vulnerable. Cancer makes us feel that way—unprotected—and it can greatly affect our mindset. If there is a “magic tea” to make you feel better, someone may suggest it. It is like handing over a package of hope and optimism. Hope helps us think positively about our future. Positive thinking can also help our bodies produce “feel-good” chemicals in the brain, to help us feel like everything is fine in the here and now. Naturally-produced hormones like serotonin, endorphins, and dopamine can help us feel better, while stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline can cause hormonal imbalances, which can affect our

mood and even our ability to meet physical challenges like illness. Reducing stress, improving our mindset, and engaging in distracting and meaningful activity can be beneficial to those affected by a cancer diagnosis, as they help reduce the body's stress hormones.

I remember one friend (whom I would consider in the alternative camp) gave me a box full of literature and videos on *The Truth About Cancer* and *Cancer: Step Outside of the Box* by Ty M. Bollinger. I was aware of this series before my diagnosis, and I truly believed if I ever got cancer, I wouldn't do the chemotherapy and radiotherapy route as it seemed too dangerous and came with risky side effects. I had already begun to be seduced by the rhetoric and fear-mongering. This friend also gave me a big chunk of turmeric (a plant of the ginger family) and told me to consider an apricot seed diet or one based on just carrots. These solutions seemed far too simple, and although I read some of the book and watched some of the videos, my scientific and practical intelligence woke up and steered me in the other direction. My gut feeling told me cancer was a beast, and diet alone could not cure it. If I wanted to live, I needed to bring out the big guns. This friend also wanted me to promise her if I ever got cancer again that I wouldn't do chemotherapy or radiation therapy. I couldn't.

I also remember a neighbor's friend who wanted to make sure I received information on how he treated cancer. He sent me an email with details on the "Budwig Protocol." They base it on a diet of primarily cottage cheese and high-quality fresh flaxseed oil. He shared a story about his dog, diagnosed with high-grade melanoma and treated successfully with this diet. He wanted me to do my research to see if the cottage cheese and flax seed oil diet may help me. I decided it wasn't for me.

I am sure people who provide others with these magic potions and miracle cures mean well. Unfortunately, for someone who is facing a cancer diagnosis, it can make one feel confused and uncertain. A person diagnosed with cancer is (most likely) already dealing with life and death decisions, and more doubt and fear can increase stress and anxiety. We all know stress and anxiety are not good for us as they can affect our natural hormones and brain chemicals as noted above.

Definitions of Cancer Treatment Approaches

In order to move forward with a basic understanding of different approaches and technologies for treating cancer, we must define what they mean. The online National Cancer Institute (NCI) Dictionary of Cancer Terms provides basic definitions for the next four terms.

Conventional medicine: A system in which medical doctors and other healthcare professionals (such as nurses, pharmacists, and therapists) treat symptoms and diseases using drugs, radiation, or surgery. Also called allopathic medicine, biomedicine, mainstream medicine, orthodox medicine, and Western medicine.

Standard medical care (or standard medical treatments): Treatments that are accepted by medical experts as a proper treatment for a specific type of disease, and are widely used by healthcare professionals. Also called best practice, standard of care, and standard therapy.

Alternative medicine: Treatments used instead of standard treatments. Standard treatments are based on the results of scientific research and are currently accepted and widely used. Less research has been done for most types of alternative medicine. Alternative medicine may include special diets, mega-dose vitamins, herbal preparations, special teas, and magnet therapy. For example, one may be on a special diet instead of anticancer drugs as a treatment for cancer.

Complementary medicine: Treatments used along with standard treatments, but not considered standard. Standard treatments are based on the results of scientific research and are currently accepted and widely used. Less research has been done for most types of complementary medicine. Complementary medicine includes acupuncture, dietary supplements, massage therapy, hypnosis, and meditation. For example, acupuncture may be used with certain drugs to help keep blood counts up and to lessen cancer pain, nausea, and vomiting.

Together, complementary and alternative treatments are usually referred to as CAM.

Integrative medicine (IM) is a type of medical care that combines conventional (standard) medical treatment with complementary and alternative (CAM) therapies that have been shown to be safe and to work. CAM therapies treat the mind, body, and spirit. In my opinion, this holistic approach is best when working toward healing, restoring and maintaining health.

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NICCIH) prefers to use the term “complementary health approaches” for non-standard care and “integrative health” when discussing the combination of mainstream healthcare combined with non-mainstream methods.

Complementary Health Approaches

There are three categories of complementary health approaches: 1. Natural products, 2. Mind and body practices, and 3. “Others.” Natural products include dietary supplements such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, and probiotics. Mind and body practices include yoga, spirituality, chiropractic, meditation, and massage therapy. The third category comprises approaches that don’t fit into either of the other two—traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy, Ayurvedic medicine, and other traditional healing approaches.

A study published in 2000 found that almost all cancer patients attending an outpatient clinic in Texas, USA were aware of CAM, and at least 83% of them had used at least one CAM approach. Spiritual practices were used by 81%, vitamins and herbs used by 63%, and movement and physical therapies by 59%.

Risk Tolerance

Life comes with guaranteed risks. For example, walking out the door and crossing the street comes with a risk. We may not see that car or motorcycle and get hit. There may be a drunk driver behind the wheel. I am sure you can think of many other examples. Cancer treatment and risk tolerance is a very deep subject. Everyone has

the right to choose their treatment regime and procedures whether or not others agree with it.

Standard care chemotherapy and radiation therapy come with risks. For example, chemotherapy can kill a person because it can affect the immune system to a point where it can't fight off infection anymore. Radiation therapy can cause "burns" (including sores and ulcers), which can cause infection. Surgery also comes with risks. Standard medical care is not accident-proof. Too much of this, too little of that, one slip and poof, disaster. People who are provided with these options must weigh out the risks against the benefits. Doctors and other specialists will discuss these risks and the likelihood of adverse outcomes.

There are over 250 anti-cancer or chemotherapeutic drugs listed on the National Cancer Institute's website. Many of these therapies are used in combination. On the website, each type of cancer comes with listed recommended therapies (although at time of printing there was none listed for anal cancer). These approved therapies have been through rigorous scientific studies and provide patients and healthcare professionals with a fair degree of confidence.

Radiation therapy has limited options. It is either administered from outside the body (external-beam), inside (brachytherapy), or systemic (through the blood). A radiation oncologist prescribes the dose intensity, frequency, and number of treatments.

Regarding alternative medicine options, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands for those who have cancer. These options also come with risks. For example, apricot seeds, also known as amygdalin, come with a risk of cyanide poisoning. Black Salve can corrode the skin. Coffee enemas have been linked to several deaths. Even though something seems natural, it doesn't mean it's safe. Consider this: The sub-Saharan African black mamba snake's venom is completely natural, but it can kill a human.

With all therapies, research is highly recommended. Speaking to a trusted healthcare professional or another qualified specialist will help allay any fears or questions one may have. Getting a second or third opinion is also recommended if you feel you need more reassurance. Each person's situation is different, so even if two

people have the same cancer, their treatment protocol may be different.

We all come with different health histories, priorities, life stages, cancer profiles, and so much more. Where we live, whom we live with, etc. can also affect our course of treatment. I know a woman who wanted to be at her son's wedding, so she delayed her second round of chemo so she would feel well enough to attend.

Educating Ourselves is Key

I found a few websites and books on CAM, and I am educating myself continually on the subject. I have found a few CAMs I believe in and have used. Some are merely for the psychological benefit, and some are for the mind-body connection. For example, self-affirmations (see Appendix A) and prayer helped me through the most difficult times of my cancer ordeal.

The Canadian Cancer Society brochure called "Complementary Therapies: A guide for people with cancer" (2014) explains a lot more about what their position is on the subject. They include information on acupuncture, aromatherapy, art therapy, biofeedback, energy therapies (e.g., Therapeutic Touch, Reiki), guided imagery, hypnosis, massage therapy, meditation, music therapy, naturopathic medicine, tai chi, and yoga. I attended restorative yoga and art therapy programs the cancer center offered free of charge.

There is much to be said about the placebo effect. This is the mysterious phenomenon whereby if a person believes a treatment will help him or her, it most likely will. Many of the alternative therapies have been found to be nothing more than a placebo effect, and I have read two excellent books on the subject. One is called *Do You Believe in Magic? The sense and nonsense of alternative medicine* by Paul A. Offit, M.D. (2013), and the other is *Trick or Treatment? Alternative medicine on trial* by Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst (2008). They are eye-opening books. I believe if an alternative treatment is safe, doesn't cost too much (or free is better!), and it doesn't interfere with conventional treatment, then it's worth a try. The mind works in mysterious ways, and it's always a good idea to keep it open to new methods of healing and

improving one's mindset. The placebo effect can do wonders. Interestingly, there was a study on people given a placebo (a pill with no medicine in it) for cancer-related nausea, and it helped more than the standard care group. They even knew they were getting a placebo!

I have found the Internet is full of “fake news” and unsubstantiated claims for many alternative treatments. I believe others are best helped by seeking valid, reliable, scientific information. A global search on the Internet can be overwhelming. In addition to searching medical journals in the online libraries such as PubMed and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I have found two books that have been helpful. *The Desktop Guide to Complementary and Alternative Medicine: An evidence-based approach*, second edition, by editors Ernst, Pittler, and Wider (2006) has comprehensive and easy-to-read tables and charts to help one decide on what alternative and complementary therapies are potentially helpful as well as any safety risks associated with them. Physicians use this book, so the language can be daunting. The other book, which is easier to read and is also written for both those diagnosed with cancer and doctors, is the *American Cancer Society Complete Guide to Complementary and Alternative Cancer Therapies*, second edition (2009). I read through both regarding acupuncture, and they both indicate acupuncture shows positive results in helping relieve nausea and vomiting, especially for reducing the vomiting that can occur after chemotherapy.

There are some great forums and groups on the Internet where you can dialog with others who are interested in natural cures, cancer treatments, and other forms of holistic healing. If you are interested in this topic, do an Internet or Facebook search for a group that may suit your interests. I have found supportive and helpful groups on Facebook. Just make sure if you are considering a complementary treatment you research the benefits and risks. Ask yourself (and perhaps a trusted medical professional) is it safe, is it affordable, plus is it compatible with my conventional treatment?

Any vitamins, supplements, herbs, or any other special teas and diets a person with cancer is taking should be discussed with a doctor, nurse, or dietician. This especially applies to a person receiving chemotherapy or radiation therapy. I have read a lot about

Gerson therapy and the Hoxsey diet (and there are many others), but I am not convinced these are safe or effective nutritional approaches to controlling or curing cancer. The Alkaline vs. Acidic diet is another one I hear about, which is based on avoiding foods that make your blood PH more acidic. Sometimes there isn't enough evidence either way to support or encourage the use of natural health products (like probiotics) or certain diets. So, it's best to advise your cancer care team about what you are taking.

Integrative medicine and its holistic approach to care is most effective toward treating cancer as it uses the best of both worlds. I know someone who saw both a medical oncologist and a naturopathic doctor at the same time. These doctors consulted with each other, and both agreed this woman needed chemotherapy, as her breast cancer was very aggressive. She is using that with some natural herbal products. Finding doctors and cancer clinics/hospitals open to both conventional and unconventional approaches to care is like hitting the jackpot. Improvements in treatment results, quality of life, hope, and comfort are what most people want.

If you are interested in attending a cancer center that incorporates integrative medicine, start by asking your doctor for a recommendation. You can also try searching the Internet for "integrative cancer center" and see what comes up. Find out what kinds of treatments are offered. For example, there may be access to spiritual care, peer guidance, or a support group. I am hopeful for the future of evidence-based, integrative care for those affected by cancer or other chronic illnesses. Closing the door to either conventional medicine or CAM will most likely mean you are missing out on some treatment and healing opportunities—for body, mind, and soul.

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RESOURCES:

Cochrane (cochrane.org)

National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov)

National Institutes of Health (nih.gov)

PubMed (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/)

Quackwatch (quackwatch.org)



