

Coping with cancer

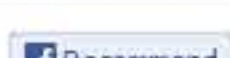
Massage, yoga among complementary oncology therapies

By CHRIS CASHMAN - editorial@nwherald.com

Created: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 5:30 a.m. CST

Updated: Tuesday, December 13, 2011 9:12 a.m. CST

 **Comments** (0)

 **Recommend** 14

 **Tweet** 21

Text Size: [Aa](#) [Aa](#) [Aa](#) [Aa](#) [Aa](#)

Beverly Smith, 66, of Crystal Lake was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003.

"I had a lumpectomy and some chemo. I was doing pretty good until 2006. It came back," she said. "I had a mastectomy, and about six months later it had spread to the lung."

She may never be cancer-free, and after her lymph nodes were removed during her mastectomy, Smith developed lymphedema, or swelling, in her right arm. A physical therapist connected with her hospital referred Smith to massage therapist Stacy Barden of Woodstock, and Smith joined a growing number of oncology patients who benefit from complementary oncology care.



Stacy Barden, owner of Harmony Falls, A Therapeutic Oasis in Woodstock, gives a 60-minute oncology massage to a client. National Institute of Health experts say that massage and other complementary treatments can help manage the symptoms of cancer and the side effects of treatment. (Sarah Nader – snader@shawmedia.com)

[Buy Northwest Herald Photos »](#)

The National Institutes of Health warns that complementary medicine never should be used in lieu of conventional cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation. But NIH experts acknowledge that scientific evidence suggests that these treatments – including massage, guided imagery, acupuncture, acupressure Qigong, meditation, energy balancing, nutritional planning, scar therapy, chiropractic adjustments and yoga – can prove useful in managing both symptoms of the disease and side effects of treatment.

"I think people should have massages whether they are ill or not. I try to go every week if I can," Smith said. "I've gone in feeling so tired and so worn out, and when I roll out of there I just feel like a wet noodle. It makes me feel good."

Smith's oncologist is all for it, she said.

"She said, 'Go for it.' More and more in the last couple of years you hear about people with cancer getting massages," Smith said. "But they should be done by the appropriate person."

Stacy Barden has owned Harmony Falls, A Therapeutic Oasis in Woodstock since 1996. A licensed massage therapist, Barden has more than 200 hours in oncology massage training.

"I'm constantly taking classes so I'm learning more and more," Barden said. "Of the patients I work with, 50 percent have been affected by cancer at some time, whether they are newly diagnosed, presently in treatment, living with cancer, a survivor, living with lymphedema or are a caregiver of a family member with cancer."

"Treatments really help them feel better because they have a new sense or a restored sense of well-being."

Healing massage is a welcome break from the rigors of treatment, Barden and Smith added.

"When a person is going through cancer treatment, everybody is poking and prodding and shoving and demanding, hitting them with radiation, giving them chemotherapy drugs that are hard on their body. Everything they experience is not pleasant," Barden said.

"We turn around and go, 'Hey, let me give you this.' And we give them a space to hold themselves with dignity and reverence and create that space for them," she continued. "That is the best thing we can do for them. And it helps."

Barden said protocols for clients are tailored for a particular person on a particular day.

Scar tissue therapy, for instance "is very meticulous work. It's very precise. That area gets worked. It can be from basic surgery, from cancer surgery. It's important to address scar tissue."

"Someone comes in for scar work, there's only so much the body can process at a time. So you do a little bit, you increase it," Barden said. "Everything with a person who receives a massage when it's something other than just relaxation – we're talking therapeutic massage – we inch our way into it. Inch by inch, layer by layer."

While research indicates oncology massage can be beneficial, it is important to seek therapists who are trained and experienced in oncology massage.

Complementary therapies such as massage increasingly are integrated into mainstream cancer programs and centers.

At the Centegra Sage Cancer Center in McHenry, chair massage is offered twice a month. And Centegra Health Bridge Fitness Centers in Huntley and Crystal Lake offer a variety of massage therapies from professionals familiar with the needs of those living with cancer.

"Our staff includes highly trained professionals who create an interdisciplinary cancer care team which cares for the whole person – body, mind and spirit," said Marianna Wolfmeyer, oncology counselor and chaplain for the Sage Cancer Center.

"At Health Bridge Fitness Center, modalities like yoga, tai chi and massage and many more are offered," Wolfmeyer said. "Expressive arts experiences and programming are also offered and being expanded."

All of the support services available at Sage are offered at no cost.

"When people want services that we can't or don't provide [such as acupuncture], we do refer to reputable service providers," Wolfmeyer said. "We actively engage in evidence-based practice, so what we offer and endorse is based on science and research, not what might be new or trendy."

Wolfmeyer said research is increasingly focused on cancer survivorship, "and the ongoing effects and experiences of cancer beyond treatment for patients and their support system."

The net effect is an improved physical and mental outlook.

"We know that when people attend to issues like nutrition, fitness, and emotional and medical management, they are more empowered to handle their experiences whatever happens with the cancer," Wolfmeyer said.

Integrated cancer treatments

Oncology massage is one of several forms of integrated or complementary oncology care that have been proven to be effective in helping cancer patients manage symptoms. Other treatments include guided imagery, acupuncture, acupressure Qigong, meditation, energy balancing, nutritional planning, scar therapy, chiropractic adjustments and yoga.

Source: National Institutes of Health

Cancer facts

n 11.7 million people alive in the U.S. have had some type of cancer.

n Half of all men and one-third of all women in the U.S. will develop cancer in their lifetime.

Source: American Cancer Society

Harmony Falls

Harmony Falls, A Therapeutic Oasis, is located at 728 E. Calhoun St. in Woodstock. Call 815-334-0842, or visit www.harmonyfalls.net. Owner Stacy Barden is treasurer of the Society for Oncology Massage. For more information, visit www.s4om.org.