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Is there a role for complementary therapy in the management of leukemia?

Patients with leukemia often seek additional treatments not prescribed by their oncologist in an effort to improve their cancer treatment outcome or to manage symptoms. Complementary therapies are used in conjunction with traditional cancer treatments to decrease symptoms and side effects associated with cancer or cancer treatment, and to improve patients' overall quality of life. Complementary therapies are distinct from so-called 'alternative' therapies, which are unproven, ineffective and may postpone or interfere with mainstream cancer treatment. Complementary therapies are pleasant, inexpensive, nonpharmacologic and effective. For patients with leukemia, the complementary therapies that are always appropriate include mind-body interventions, such as self-hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery and breath awareness. Massage and reflexology (foot massage) decrease symptoms with effects lasting at least 2 days following treatment. Acupuncture is very beneficial for symptom management without adverse consequences. Physical fitness with regular exercise and healthy dietary habits can significantly decrease side effects of cancer treatments and may prolong survival. Botanical extracts and vitamin supplements may interfere with active cancer treatments, and should be discussed with the oncologist or pharmacist before use.

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