

Topical Aromatherapy: Increasing Staff Knowledge and Alleviating Anxiety in Patients With Cancer

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Individuals with cancer experience high levels of anxiety. The purpose of this quality improvement project was to improve staff knowledge of topical aromatherapy and evaluate its impact on the level of anxiety experienced by patients with cancer. The efficacy of an education curriculum intervention to increase staff knowledge of topical aromatherapy was evaluated, and patients shared their experiences receiving a hand massage using essential oils prediluted with massage oil. Staff knowledge about topical aromatherapy increased postintervention. All patients who received a topical aromatherapy hand massage (N = 9) had a decrease of five or more points on the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Adults™ Short Form Y-1 from pre- to postintervention. Patient responses also showed reduced pain and enhanced sleep.

AT A GLANCE

- Staff knowledge of topical aromatherapy use can be improved through education.
- Topical aromatherapy is a nurse-led symptom management approach.
- Patients who received a topical aromatherapy hand massage reported decreased levels of anxiety.

KEYWORDS

topical aromatherapy; anxiety; cancer; quality improvement

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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Cancer is a challenging disease that affects patients' physical and emotional health (Linden et al., 2012). Patients with cancer require support to maintain their quality of life (Mao et al., 2022), and research indicates an association among cancer diagnosis, emotional distress, and decreased quality of life (Golant et al., 2003). On average, 10%–19% of patients receiving oncology care report feelings of anxiety during cancer treatment (Linden et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2011, 2013; Oberoi et al., 2020). Anxiety is a complex symptom, and each patient's experience of it is unique. Patients diagnosed with cancer can develop anxiety from an emotional response to their diagnosis, loss of control, or fear of experiencing treatment-related side effects (Imanishi et al., 2009; Ozkaraman et al., 2018; Pitman et al., 2018).

Integrative therapies can be used to manage feelings of anxiety and enhance patients' quality of life (Lusk & Kahn-John, 2019; Ringdahl et al., 2019). Aromatherapy is an emerging intervention for decreasing feelings of anxiety (Lusk & Kahn-John, 2019) and can be safely combined with massage to support symptom management (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2020). Examples of integrative therapies that can be offered by nurses include acupressure, guided imagery, meditation, and music (Ringdahl et al., 2019). Lack of knowledge surrounding integrative therapy and its applications is a barrier to nurses providing these interventions (Admi et al., 2017). Although some nurses working in cancer care believe that integrative therapies can improve patients' quality of life, many do not feel confident in educating patients about these interventions (Admi et al., 2017). Providing oncology clinicians with education about complementary and integrative therapies is imperative (Mao et al., 2022). It is important for oncology nurses to be proficient with integrative treatments so that they can assess patient use and provide education about safe, evidence-informed interventions for symptom management (Chui et al., 2018).

A study comparing patients with cancer who received topical aromatherapy massage with patients who received usual care found that individuals in the topical aromatherapy group had a decrease in their anxiety and depression scores for as many as two weeks following the intervention (Wilkinson et al., 2007). Similarly, the anxiolytic effects of topical aromatherapy in patients with breast cancer were explored, and results showed a significant