

UNDERSTANDING THE 2023 ASCO-SIO GUIDELINES ON CANCER-RELATED ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

FAST FACTS

- Evidence in a guideline from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the Society for Integrative Oncology (SIO) supports using some integrative approaches to relieve anxiety and depression in adults with cancer.
- For anxiety during treatment, aromatherapy, mindfulness-based interventions, music therapy, reflexology, relaxation therapy and yoga are recommended. Although not included in the guidelines, [hypnotherapy has been shown](#) to be helpful in the management of pain and anxiety. After treatment, acupuncture, mindfulness-based interventions, reflexology, tai chi and/or qigong can be helpful.
- For depression during treatment, the guidelines recommend mindfulness-based interventions, music therapy, relaxation therapy, reflexology, and yoga. In the period after active cancer treatment, mindfulness-based interventions, tai chi, and yoga are recommended.
- Using mindfulness-based interventions to manage anxiety and depression during and after treatment is one of the guideline's strongest recommendations.

How Integrative Approaches Can Relieve Cancer-Related Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression are common in people who have cancer and in their family members and caregivers. [From the abstract:](#) "Adults diagnosed with cancer report higher levels of stress than healthy controls, with diagnosis and the start of treatment being the most stressful times. In short term, stress covaries with depressive and anxiety symptoms, negative quality of life, physical symptoms, and treatment morbidities across patients."

How can integrative approaches help relieve anxiety and depression?

Integrative approaches are used along with conventional care as part of your cancer care plan.

They help combat the emotional effects of cancer and its treatment and help restore your quality of life and feelings of wellbeing. Also, they create space for you as an active participant in healing.

How do I know if integrative approaches work?

Evidence to support the use of integrative approaches for cancer-related anxiety and depression is increasing. The SIO-ASCO guidelines focus on patient-centered and evidence-based integrative approaches to manage cancer-related anxiety and

depression. It only recommends integrative approaches where the evidence shows that the benefits outweigh the potential harms.

How was the guideline developed?

Together, SIO-ASCO formed an expert panel to review the evidence about integrative approaches for cancer-related anxiety and depression. The panel included experts in integrative oncology, medical oncology, radiation oncology, surgical oncology, palliative oncology, social sciences, mind-body medicine, and nursing, along with patient advocates.

The experts wanted to answer questions about which integrative therapies are recommended for adults with cancer:

- for managing symptoms of anxiety experienced after diagnosis or during active treatment;
- in managing symptoms of anxiety experienced after treatment;
- for managing symptoms of depression experienced after diagnosis or during active treatment; and
- in managing symptoms of depression experienced after treatment.

They reviewed individual research trial reports and reviews of groups of studies.

The guideline includes the expert panel's recommendations for using integrative approaches to manage cancer-related anxiety

and depression in adults. Also, it describes quality of the evidence and the strength of the recommendation for each approach.

ASCO is partnering with SIO on further guidelines that will incorporate integrative approaches for helping cancer-related symptoms and addressing side effects from cancer treatments. Also, ASCO has published an update of its earlier guideline for providers about the optimum screening, assessment, and care of anxiety and depressive symptoms in adults with cancer. The SIO-ASCO guideline covered in this pocket guide and the ASCO guideline provide comprehensive recommendations for assessing and treating anxiety and depression in adults with cancer.

The Best Integrative Approaches for Cancer-Related Anxiety and Depression in Adults

Acupuncture, aromatherapy, mindfulness-based interventions, music therapy, reflexology, relaxation therapy, tai chi and/or qigong, and yoga can help relieve cancer-related anxiety. Some approaches work best during treatment. Others work best after treatment.

Mindfulness-based interventions, music therapy, relaxation therapy, reflexology, tai chi, and yoga can help relieve cancer-related depression. Some treatments work best during treatment while others may be more effective after treatment.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Using mindfulness-based interventions to manage anxiety and depression during and after treatment is one of the guideline's strongest recommendations. Mindfulness means "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally," according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic there.

The most common mindfulness-based interventions are mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. Both focus on learning how to pay attention to what is happening here and now and helping you change the way you think and behave.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction includes sitting meditation and mindful movement, including walking meditation and gentle yoga. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is like mindfulness-based stress reduction, but it also includes cognitive-behavioral therapy, which is a common type of talk therapy.

Read more about mindfulness-based interventions by visiting our [Mind-Body Medicine for Whole Person Cancer Care guide](#).

Benefits of Integrative Approaches

The benefits of the integrative approaches recommended by the expert panel for cancer-related anxiety and depression outweigh the potential harms. As not all modalities have been studied

throughout the care trajectory, it can be difficult to parse out what will work best and when. For many people, it may be easier to try approaches that resonate for you as possibly useful or of interest, no matter the point you may be in your cancer journey.

See the next section of this pocket guide for information about the best integrative approaches for cancer-related depression.

Which integrative approaches work best for anxiety and depression during cancer treatment?

Aromatherapy, mindfulness-based interventions, music therapy, reflexology, relaxation therapy and yoga work best during treatment, thus it is imperative to consider not just the type of cancer you have (or had) but what modality makes intuitive sense to you as a person.

The strongest evidence is for mindfulness-based interventions.

Most of the research about yoga focuses on breast cancer. There is less evidence about other cancers.

There is data for use of aromatherapy in cancer to prevent nausea, lessen anxiety, and improve sleep. For more information on this topic, see the [NIH PDQ on aromatherapy](#). It is one of a dozen complementary and alternative therapy PDQ topics updated regularly and can be found in a format for patients.

Which integrative approaches work best for anxiety and depression after cancer treatment?

Acupuncture, mindfulness-based interventions, reflexology, tai chi and/or qigong, and yoga work best after active treatment.

The strongest evidence is for mindfulness-based interventions.

Most of the research about yoga focuses on breast cancer. There is less evidence about other cancers.

Why isn't there more evidence about integrative approaches for cancer-related anxiety and depression?

Many of the recommendations are based on an intermediate level of evidence. Some are based on a low level of evidence. The benefit of each recommended integrative approach outweighs the risk.

The strength of many recommendations is moderate. It is weak for some recommendations. This means that the recommendations may change when more evidence is available. The expert panel did not have enough evidence to recommend for or against other integrative approaches.

Not having more evidence now does not mean that integrative approaches do not work. Some integrative approaches may work better than current evidence shows, and more research is needed. It is difficult to study many integrative approaches, which makes accumulation of evidence slow.

The most reliable evidence comes from randomized clinical trials, which compare one treatment to a placebo or another treatment. A placebo is a pill that looks like the real medicine but does not contain any medicine. There is no placebo for most integrative approaches.

But researchers are finding better ways to study integrative approaches for cancer. They are conducting larger clinical trials of integrative approaches and studying the effectiveness of integrative treatments compared to usual care. This allows them to determine if adding them to standard care is worthwhile.

How to Find Integrative Approaches for Cancer-Related Anxiety and Depression in Adults

You can and should get help for your cancer-related anxiety and depression. Someone on your care team will be able to refer you to a provider who can help address feelings of anxiety and depression that arise during and beyond active treatment. You should ask them about the availability of some of these integrative approaches.

How do I find integrative approaches for cancer-related anxiety and depression?

Work with your care team to decide which treatments, including integrative approaches, may be best for you. Your oncologist, navigator, nurse, or social worker may be able to refer you to or help you find the right integrative approaches.

It is okay for you to mention the guidelines on integrative approaches to relieve anxiety and depression in adults with cancer. You can even bring a copy of the [guideline](#) or this Pocket Guide to your appointment. Oncologists know that they can rely on guidelines from ASCO and SIO.

What do I do if my cancer center doesn't have integrative approaches?

If your cancer center does not offer integrative medicine or integrative oncology services, your team may still be able to help you find integrative approaches in the community. Also, you can look for other cancer centers in your area that offer integrative approaches. There are also virtual options available through places such as [The Smith Center for Healing and the Arts](#) and the [Life with Cancer Center at Inova Schar](#).

Are these approaches covered by insurance?

While many insurance companies now cover at least some of the costs for some integrative treatments, coverage varies. Contact your insurance company to see what your plan covers.

If your insurance does not cover integrative approaches or offer enough coverage, look at services at cancer centers near you. Some cancer or community centers offer integrative approaches at a lower rate or have a sliding scale. There also may be free or low-cost solutions through local nonprofit organizations.

Resource List

Use these resources to help relieve your cancer-related anxiety and depression.

Cancer-related anxiety and depression

- [Anxiety](#). American Cancer Society.
- [Depression](#). American Cancer Society.

Anxiety and depression guidelines

- [Integrative Oncology Care of Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Adults with Cancer](#), a brief overview of the evidence-based recommendations for providers on integrative approaches to managing pain in adults with cancer. Society for Integrative Oncology and American Society for Clinical Oncology.
- [Integrative Oncology Care of Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Adults With Cancer: Society for Integrative Oncology-ASCO Guideline](#), evidence-based recommendations for providers on integrative approaches to managing pain in adults with cancer. Society for Integrative Oncology and American Society of Clinical Oncology.
- [Management of Anxiety and Depression in Adult Survivors of Cancer: ASCO Guideline Update](#), an update to the ASCO guideline for providers on the management of anxiety and depression in adult cancer survivors.

Finding and paying for integrative approaches for cancer-related anxiety and depression

- [Directory of Integrative Healthcare Professionals](#) includes health care practitioners who've completed a fellowship in integrative medicine. The University of Arizona Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine.
- [How Do I Talk to My Doctor About Complementary and Integrative Methods?](#) offers questions to ask your cancer care team. American Cancer Society.
- [6 Things to Know When Selecting a Complementary Health Practitioner](#) offers tips for searching for a complementary health practitioner. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
- [Will My Insurance Cover Complementary and Integrative Therapies?](#) provides an overview with questions to ask your insurance company. American Cancer Society.

Free and low-cost solutions

- [UniteForHER](#) offers and funds integrative therapies for breast and ovarian cancer survivors.
- [Cancer Support Community](#) is a cancer support helpline staffed by patient navigators and resource specialists who can connect patients and their families to information about cancer and local support services or just lend an ear.

My Notes and Questions

Lined area for notes and questions, consisting of two columns of horizontal lines.

Reference:

1. Anderson BJ, Lacchetti C, AShing K, et al. Management of Anxiety and Depression in Adult Survivors of Cancer: ASCO Guideline Update. Journal of Clinical Oncology 41, no. 18 (June 20, 2023) 3426-3453. <https://ascopubs.org/doi/full/10.1200/JCO.23.00293>. Accessed September 25, 2023.