Understanding Bodywork for the Patient With Cancer

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The goal of this article is to increase oncology nurses’ understanding of common bodywork modalities and the current research about them in the oncology setting. Bodywork is a broad term that incorporates massage and energy modalities. Eleven modalities are described. In addition, issues related to safety, licensure, making referrals, and nurses’ and bodyworkers’ roles are discussed. Better knowledge will increase oncology nurses’ abilities to assess and guide patients’ bodywork choices and facilitate discussions with patients, physicians, and bodyworkers to ensure that patients with cancer are receiving safe and effective care.

Deep tissue massage encompasses several modalities, such as neuromuscular therapy and trigger-point therapy, that target areas of muscle and connective tissue constriction to release chronic patterns of tension (American Massage Therapy Association [AMTA], 2005a; Decker, 1999; Holmes, 1999). They are done with heavy pressure applied by a practitioner’s fingers, hands, forearms, knees, and elbows. Recipients need to be in good health to withstand the heavy pressure. This, in addition to the risks associated with altered coagulation states and bony metastasis, make cancer a contraindication for deep tissue massage (MacDonald, 1999; Weiger et al., 2002).

Athletic, or sports, massage is designed to improve and maintain performance and to prevent and rehabilitate injuries. Practitioners use techniques that include assisted stretching and application of heat and cold (AMTA, 2005a; Ashton & Cassel, 2002; Decker, 1999). Although the techniques may...