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).

Aromatherapy massage is the controlled use of essential oils to effect physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Essential oils are aromatic essences distilled from plants. Oils may be used individually or in blends to achieve the desired effects (Perez, 2003). Although essential oils can be used by themselves in diffusions, baths, and compresses, they often are mixed into oils, lotions, or gels. Aromatherapy is easily combined with massage. Generally, practitioners who use aromatherapy provide clients with a choice of oils (Hadfield, 2001). Research has focused on the role of aromatherapy massage in hospice settings (Soden, Vincent, Craske, Lucas, & Ashley, 2004; Wilcock et al., 2004; Wilkinson, Aldridge, Salmon, Cain, & Wilson, 1999). The Cochrane review of aromatherapy and massage concluded, “Massage and aromatherapy massage confer short term benefits on psychological wellbeing, with the effect on anxiety supported by limited evidence. Effects on physical symptoms may also occur” (Fellowes, Barnes, & Wilkinson, 2004, p. 1).